The Newspaper Comic Strip in the Making of American Mass Culture, 1900-1935

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the teachers who have inspired me: David Gimson, Josh Zeitz, Dan Scroop, Andrew Heath and Matt Townson.

Abstract

In the first third of the twentieth century, the newspaper comic strip took America by storm. Within a decade of the first single panel 'funny' appearing in 1896, comics had become a firm feature in American newspapers. Comics quickly spread across the United States, meaning Americans from vastly different walks of life could consume the same narratives simultaneously. This rapid spread was aided by the explosion of syndication in the 1910s, and the comics acquired enormous cultural salience. Comic artists –whose portrayal of mainstream life was driven in part by the demands of the syndicates to maximise their market –increasingly aimed to appeal to Americans from a wide range of social backgrounds and wished to avoid alienating readers by covering any topics that could be deemed offensive. As a result, they inadvertently created a normative depiction of American society centred around extremely narrow cultural conceptions of a white middle class, which excluded Black Americans and shored up a racialized hierarchy. Instead of engaging with Progressive political discourse the comics sought to smooth over difficult racial issues by ignoring and excluding them.

This thesis explores the evolution and impact of newspaper comic strips on American popular culture, arguing that they played a critical role in the wider consolidation of American mass culture in this period, despite being largely overlooked by historians. It uses extensive archival resources to detail the early development of the comics industry, and the dynamics of the syndicates. It then goes on to analyse the narratives of a dozen comics over a 35-year period (over 26,000 individual strips) in order to uncover the complicated and often profoundly satirical way that the comics dealt with issues around race, gender and particularly class and social status. Lastly, it explores the impact of the comics on American culture, including other forms of popular culture, advertising and consumer goods and language and dialect.

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Introduction

The comic supplement is an American institution, recognized and established, like the trolley car and the quick lunch counter.

'The Evolution of the Comic Picture and the Comic Artist', *San Francisco Daily Call*, 12th November 1905.

Born at a time of profound social change in America, the syndicated comic strip had, within just a decade of its first appearance, become a national institution.[1] With its use of speech, regular characters and continuing amusing storylines about everyday life, the comic strip differed from the single panel political cartoons that preceded it, representing a new genre of American popular culture that appealed to a broad cross-section of the population. Unlike the 'trolley car and the quick lunch counter', the comic supplement – which included a selection of strips – appeared in millions of American homes every day, and was read by men, women, adults and children. As content was syndicated across the country, it became an integral part of a truly national print culture that was shared across the social spectrum in the early twentieth-century United States. My research investigates the evolution of the syndicated comic strip, arguing that it played a critical role in both the consolidation of mass culture and the development of the concept of a distinctly American identity in the early twentieth century.

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[1] The era of the syndicated, serialised comic strip is generally considered to have started with the publication of Richard Outcault's *The Yellow Kid* in Josepth Pulitzer's *New York World* in 1895. The strip (along with Outcault) moved to William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* in 1896 after an intense legal battle between Pulitzer and Hearst, which resulted in both papers publishing versions of the strip until 1898.

In 1963, one of the first of the very few in-depth studies of the industry noted that the comics 'enjoy various spheres of influence in the culture as a whole because they reflect that culture and because they are in themselves an integral part of American life.'[2] The authors – David Manning White and Robert H. Abel – noted the strips' integral role in the daily lives of millions of readers, and their ability to 'elicit almost unbelievable responses from their audience', concluding that the strips were 'latent with meaning' and 'doubtless work[ed] to reinforce many deeply-held beliefs about the meaning of life in America and the relationship of individuals to other individuals and to society'.[3] These are bold claims, relating to three key areas: the strips' widespread distribution and broad appeal, the way their content both reflected and shaped readers' perceptions and beliefs about the society they lived in and their place within it, and the way readers responded to the strips.

Like White and Abel, I argue that the syndicated newspaper comic strip was, by mid-century, an integral part of American culture and that its explosion onto the American cultural scene is worth understanding more deeply. My research aims to demonstrate the part the comics played in the consolidation of American mass culture, and the negotiation of conceptions of American identity, in the early twentieth century. Unlike most studies, my thesis combines an in-depth examination of the mechanics and development of the early comics industry with a detailed and extensive analysis of the content of a selection of strips. I look at the evolution of the strip and the impact of national syndication on the mechanics of its creation and distribution. I then

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[2] Robert H. Abel and David Manning White, eds., *The Funnies: An American Idiom* (Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 23.
[3] Ibid., p. 23.

examine how its content reflected questions of American identity and social hierarchy, how it was perceived and interpreted by both ordinary Americans and intellectual commentators, and its impact on American culture in the twentieth century and beyond.

American culture at the turn of the century

The first three decades of the twentieth century brought profound change to the United States. Rapid industrialisation at the end of the nineteenth century meant that in 1900 America's national wealth was quadruple that of 35 years before.[4] With industrialisation came urbanisation and, by 1920, more Americans lived in cities than in rural areas. For much of the period, the economy was booming and items like the telephone and the motor car went from novel technological innovations to must-have consumer products. The movie theater replaced the vaudeville stage as the national pastime, with the first 'talkie' (The Jazz Singer) premiering in 1927. The era seemed to herald social progress too, and 1920 saw the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which prohibited the denial of the right to vote on the grounds of sex.

The picture was not all positive, however. Despite the thriving economy, in the 1910s two thirds of adult male workers earned less than the $600 a year deemed necessary to maintain a reasonable standard of living.[5] Concerned over widespread poverty and the degradation they perceived to be taking over the cities, Progressive reformers sought to impose moral standards on

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[4] Michael C. Emery, *The Press and America: an Interpretive History of the Mass Media* (Boston; London: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), p.154.
[5] Ibid., p. 209.

the American people. They were particularly interested in immigrants who needed to be taught how to be 'good American citizens', and learn the 'rules' of American culture. Fears about the effect of the immigrant 'menace' pervaded academic and political discourse, resulting in a series of measures to restrict legislation culminating in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. While enfranchisement enabled certain women to participate in the democratic process, state-level constitutions across the South ensured that blacks were almost completely excluded from political participation. In the North, the unofficial segregation of residential areas and many public spaces shored up racial divides, with tensions coming to a head during a series of race riots in 1919. And yet, despite all this division, many claimed that the new consumer culture had served to integrate the American populace into one, with *The American Mercury* claiming in 1924 that the radio, the comic strip, and the dance hall had made the Americans into 'a homogenous people'.[6]

The comic strip & American print culture

The railroad network that had been developed during the late nineteenth century connected the towns and cities of the United States, enabling the national distribution of print content for the first time. Between 1870 and 1900, the number of daily newspapers quadrupled, and the number of copies sold each day increased six-fold.[7] By 1900 there were over 12,000 weekly newspapers in publication.[8] This reflected both an increasing population (which doubled during the same

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[6] 'Satan in the Dance Hall', *The American Mercury* (June 1924).
[7] Michael C. Emery, Edwin Emery, and Nancy L. Roberts, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media* (Boston, 2000), p. 157.
[8] Ibid., p. 157.

period) and also a growing readership. The next twenty years saw a marked increase in the influence of newspaper chains. In 1899 corporations controlled 17% of all newspapers and periodicals. By 1919 this figure had risen to 83%.[9] The six largest chains in circulation distributed nearly 70% of the country's daily chain circulation and 26% of the country's total by 1933.[10]

Comic strips – or 'funnies' as they were often termed – were a central part of the explosive growth of the newspaper industry in the early twentieth century. They were a distinctly new genre of print media, differing from political cartoons and illustrated stories in several ways. Once fully established, the funnies were characterised by several hallmarks: the use of sequential panels to tell a story that included the passage of time, the combination of image and text, the use of speech and thought bubbles, the introduction of recurring characters with developed personalities and relationships, the focus on social rather than political subject matter and – later – the construction of continuity-based storylines that spanned weeks or even months.

Newspaper editors fought expensive legal battles for the rights to the best comics and even small rural papers across the country boasted of the latest additions to their comic supplements, with content supplied nationally by six major syndicates. The syndicates of the early twentieth century were critical to the development of the mass media in America, and the lack of understanding around how they operated represents a significant gap in the historiography of American print culture. No substantive research has previously been done to document the rise of the big content

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[9] Alfred Lee, The Daily Newspaper in America: The Evolution of a Social Instrument (London, 2000), p. 197.
[10] Ibid., p325.

syndicates like *King Features* and the *Newspaper Enterprise Association*, despite their importance in the American media for much of the twentieth century.

Newspaper comic strips played a significant role in the evolution of mass-produced, mass-consumed culture in twentieth-century America, a phenomenon whose roots lay in antebellum fiction. Cheap, serialised stories were published from around the 1840s, representing what Michael Denning terms 'one of the earliest culture industries'.[11] Evolving into a medium often referred to under the catchall 'dime novels', there were in fact three distinct variations: weekly story papers carrying between six and eight serialised stories; the classic 'dime' or 'pamphlet' novel; and cheap 'libraries', which were weekly series of short, complete novels.[12] Dime novels were, from their initial publication, 'fantastically popular,' particularly amongst the working classes.[13] Cheap, exciting and simple to follow, they were readily available and widely read by children in particular. Their sensationalist and exciting subject matter has led the majority of commentators and scholars to conclude that they offered an escapist experience to the reader, enabling them to lose themselves in a made-up world far from the realities that they themselves inhabited.[14] Michael Denning (whose Marxian approach is evident in his writing on the subject) is a notable exception, arguing that the tendency to see dime novels as 'an opiate of the people', and 'lacking any genuine symbolic meaning' is a symptom of middle-class perceptions of popular culture, rather than a true reflection of how the stories were interpreted by readers.[15]

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[11] Michael Denning, 'Cheap Stories: Notes on Popular Fiction and Working-Class Culture in Nineteenth-Century America', *History Workshop* (1986), p. 1.
[12] Ibid., p. 1.
[13] Margaret Cassidy, ''Pernicious Stuff': Nineteenth Century Media, The Children who Loved them, and the Adults who Worried about them', *A Review of General Semantics* (2011), p. 306.
[14] Vicki Anderson, *The Dime Novel in Children's Literature* (London, 2005), p. 111.
[15] Denning, 'Cheap Stories', pp. 4–5.

Regardless, it can be stated with a reasonable degree of certainty that dime novels covered themes that were sensational – as opposed to humdrum – in nature, focusing on adventure and not the everyday. Their audience was largely made up of members of an early working class. Despite this, they helped to shape popular and literary depictions of the West, and their impact on nineteenth-century cultural tropes was significant and wide-reaching.

The comics of the early twentieth century built on the success of the dime novel, but differed from them in several ways. First, while they were initially aimed at the same audience as dime novels – children, immigrants and workers – they quickly evolved into a product with a much wider popular appeal, which spanned divides of social class, geography and age. They also differed in terms of subject material, which was much less sensational than that of the dime novels, deriving humour from the everyday instead of the extraordinary. The size and breadth of the comics' readership has much in common with the early film industry, although of course the comics came first. Like films and adverts, comics were visual in nature and combined speech and pictures to convey a message or punchline. Similarly to adverts, comic strips were quick to consume, comprising at most a single page of perhaps nine panels and more often a single line of three or four. In isolation, one strip is unlikely to elicit as much of an emotional response in its audience as a film or a novel. However, the repetitiveness of readers' exposure to the same material was unique to the comics at this time. Reading the comics, particularly once they began appearing daily (1907), became part of the ritual of reading the paper.[16] Unlike films, which were usually one-offs, newspaper comics featured recurring themes and characters that appeared for

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[16] Leo Bogart, 'Comic strips and their adult readers', in David Manning White and Robert H. Abel, eds., *The Funnies: An American Idiom* (1963), p. 236.

decades. Set largely in realistic and relatable American spaces like homes and workplaces, they played a unique part in the growth of American visual culture and definition of American identity.

By the 1930s, social commentators acknowledged the impact of the funny papers on the American public. In 1931, a Supreme Court case concerning the applicability of an old Blue Law to the Sunday papers ruled that 'the Sunday paper is looked upon, and has grown to be, a necessity, and this court so holds'.[17] That same year, Gallup released results from the first poll on comic readership, which suggested that the comics were more popular than the news stories in Sunday papers, and had a mass adult readership that spanned all social classes, from professionals to the 'urban masses'.[18] Advertisers were keen to capitalise on the comics' reach, and in 1933, advertising space in *Comic Weekly* was selling for $16,000 to $17,500 a page, compared to average rates of $11,500 to $12,500 for national circulation in genteel magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Ladies' Home Journal.*[19] Confirming the mass readership of the funnies, *Fortune* magazine estimated in 1934 that around 75% of newspaper readers read the comics on a regular basis, with the newspaper comics industry grossing six million dollars a year.[20] Furthermore, with comics produced for syndicates and not individual papers, Americans from all walks of life and across the entire United States read the same strips, engaging with

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[17] Alfred McClung Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America* (London, 2000), 1 & 2, p. 400. Blue laws – also known as Sunday laws – were laws designed to restrict or ban certain secular activities from taking place on a Sunday, for religious reasons.
[18] Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920 - 1940* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 110.
[19] Ibid., p. 112.
[20] 'The Funny Papers', *Fortune Magazine,* April 1934, p. 45.

Jiggs and Maggie, the Gump family or Mutt and Jeff on a daily basis. It is telling that by the

1940s, only one major paper (*The New York Times*) did not have a comic supplement.[21]

In 1933, the Metropolitan Museum in Manhattan acknowledged the significance of the funnies

by holding an exhibition of comic strips, which traced them back to their origins. An organiser

commented that 'though the academicians may hoot, the comic strip concocters continue to leave

an impact on the artistic map of America'.[22] The dismissive attitude among academic circles

noted by the organiser in 1933 has endured to the present day, with very few meaningful studies

of the comics produced, despite a deluge of coffee-table hardbacks. Aside from publishing a few

general histories and reference works, only a small handful of scholars have sought to use the

strips as their primary source base.[23] Thomas Kemnitz summarised what he considered to be the

view of most historians, that, comic strips 'rely upon – and help to perpetuate – a number of

social attitudes and stereotypes, many of them relatively trivial... They generally do not address

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[21] Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center: Roy Crane Papers, Box 11, Folder 3, 'Radio Script with WORZ', undated.

[22] 'My New York', *Massillon Evening Independent* (March 1933).

[23] The most comprehensive reference work is Ron Goulart's E*ncyclopaedia of American Comics* (Facts on File; New York, 1990). Todd Hignite, *Strips, Toons, and Bluesies: Essays in Comics and Culture* (Princeton Architectural Press; New York, 2006) is a useful popular history of the comic strip. Magnussen and Christiansen (eds), *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics* (Museum Tusculanum Press; Copenhagen, 2000) provides a staunch defence of comic strips as subject matter, and some suggestions on how best to approach them. Significant book-length studies of newspaper comics that bear mention include White and Abel (eds), *The Funnies,* Coupiere and Horn (eds), *A History of the Comic Strip* (New York, 1968), Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945* (London, 1998). Several intriguing journal articles a have also expanded the field in recent years, in particular: Richard Moss, 'Racial Anxiety on the Comics Page: Harry Herschfield's 'Abie the Agent,' 1914-1940,' *The Journal of Popular Culture,* Volume 40, Issue 1 (Feb 2007), Kerry Soper, 'Performing 'Jiggs': Irish Caricature and Comedic Ambivalence toward Assimilation and the American Dream in George McManus's Bringing Up Father,' *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 4:2 (April, 2005), Jill Kasen, 'Whither the Self-Made Man? Comic Culture and the crisis of legitimation in the United States', *Social Problems*, 28 (December 1980), Kerry Soper, 'From Swarthy Ape to Sympathetic Everyman and Subversive Trickster: The Development of Irish Caricature in American Comic Strips between 1890 and 1920', *Journal of American Studies,* Volume 39, Issue 2 (2005). PhD theses by Elsa Nystrom (1989) and Ralph Suiter have also explored the development comics industry in the period (2017).

themselves to the important social questions…'[24] He noted that the strips may offer insight into social attitudes and current fashions (such as ladies' clothes and home decor) but 'unlike their political counterparts, they do not provide much insight into the intellectual bases of opinion'.[25] Kemnitz did argue that the part cartoons played in the formation of the sense of humour of a generation merits study, but beyond this it appears that comic strips should not be associated with 'serious' historical subjects.

In fact, as historian Constance Rourke asserts in her study on national humour, 'there is scarcely an aspect of the American character to which humor is not related, few which in some sense it has not governed'.[26] While the strips cannot be read as a direct indicator of some amorphous 'public opinion', analysing their content can give historians valuable insights into social attitudes and popular discourse, making the comic strip a valuable lens onto the sensibilities of their readership. Their widespread distribution, reflective subject matter and the need to appeal to Americans from geographically and socially diverse backgrounds meant that artists had to tap into – and arguably helped shape - mainstream opinion on many subjects, helping to craft and reinforce social norms on race, class, gender and identity. Lastly, the comics played a role as an – albeit accidental – educator, communicating ideas to its audience, in particular groups with limited literacy such as immigrants and children, who looked to the strips to provide cultural cues on language and behaviour.

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[24] Thomas Milton Kemnitz, 'The Cartoon as a Historical Source', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 4 (Summer 1973), p. 83.
[25] Ibid., p. 86.
[26] Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York, 1931), p. ix.

Examining the construction of social norms in such a widely accessed form of nationally shared

culture provides new insights into several distinct but related areas of historiography: the

development of the American class system and the definition of social status; intellectual

conceptions of citizenship and national culture; and studies of whiteness, race, and ethnicity.

Furthermore, the strips – and the evolution of the comic syndication industry as a whole – also

existed within larger narratives that structure historians' understanding of the Progressive period:

the urbanisation of American life, the standardisation brought about by the triumph of mass

culture and the professionalization and bureaucratisation of industry.

Class, consumerism and culture

Defining the place of class in American history is not a straightforward endeavour. In the first

half of the twentieth century, historians in the Progressive school emphasised the social impact of

clashing economic interests of different groups (farmers, workers, etc), highlighting the conflict

between 'the people' and the entrenched establishment interests of the political elite.[27] While this

approach was structured around economics, there was little effort to really theorise class or

identify class consciousness beyond the specific interests inherent in the definition of each group.

Into the 1950s, this conflict-based approach fell out of fashion and a different model of American

society gained traction, one in which class was largely irrelevant. This Hartzian notion of

America as the model of a classless society – rooted in the country's lack of a feudal past or

land-based aristocracy and foundation on broadly democratic and egalitarian principles – has

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[27] Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1913); Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson (Abridged)* (London, 1960); Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1954).

been pervasive in academic and popular discourse.[28] This notion of a classless society developed into the belief central to what has become known as the 'consensus' viewpoint, that while class – and by extension class conflict – did (and does) exist in America, the vast majority of Americans fall somewhere in the middle anyway, and the majority of social conflicts have revolved around differences of race, gender, region and religion.[29]

From the 1960s onwards academic opinion shifted again, with historians like Sean Willentz and Herbert Gutman seeking to apply the theories of E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* to American history.[30] This new group of 'New Labor' historians examined the making of the American working class, arguing for the existence of a self-aware group that saw itself as sharing common economic and cultural interests. Building on this trajectory, the 1980s saw the first studies interested in understanding the formation of a self-aware middle class, with historians like Mary Ryan and Stewart Blumin asking how the middle class saw itself as a distinct group, and what made it different from those it perceived as above and below it.[31] These accounts focused on the role of culture in defining social status, examining the importance of family life, domestic relations and consumption practises. The 1990s saw the 'New Labor

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[28] Margo Anderson, 'The Language of Class in Twentieth-Century America', *Social Science History*, 12 (1988), p. 350.
[29] Sherry Linkon and John Russo, 'Class Confusions: American Media Discourse about Class', *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 46 (2001), p. 367; See also Daniel Joseph Boorstin, *The Americans, the Democratic Experience* (New York, 1974); Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*; Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*.
[30] Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963); Herbert George Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (Oxford, 1976); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1986); Bruce Laurie, *Artisans Into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-century America* (New York, 1989).
[31] Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790 - 1865* (Cambridge, 1998); Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge, 1989).

History' criticised for failing to recognise the role of race and gender in working class formation, with several studies published over the last few decades studying the intersection of race, gender and class.[32]

While the traditional idea of a 'classless' United States has been largely defunct since the 1960s, historiography on the impact of mass culture has called into question the relevance of economic class divides as a means of understanding American society from the turn of the twentieth century. In the opening years of the century Americans from across the country participated in the astonishing growth of mass culture: that is consumer goods and cultural products that were created, distributed and experienced 'en masse', enjoyed – in varying degrees –by men and women of all races, from all regions and of all classes. While there has been some debate among historians as to the true source of 'mass culture', there is widespread acceptance that it was firmly established by the 1920s, thanks to innovations like the radio, movie theater, and convenience store – along with the accompanying national advertising campaigns promoting branded goods.[33] Following the lead of social commentators writing at the time, historians have argued that this new mass-produced, mass-consumed culture had a homogenizing impact on the American population, one which effectively expanded the base of the self-identifying middle class to incorporate blue collar workers who could lead a 'middle class' lifestyle due to higher income levels, access to consumer goods and increased leisure time.[34]

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[32] See for example David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London; New York, 2007).

[33] For a detailed discussion of the various claims around the first signs of 'mass culture', see Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century* (New York, 2000).

[34] Stuart Ewen, *Captains Of Consciousness Advertising And The Social Roots Of The Consumer Culture* (New York, 2001); Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (New York, 1992); T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in*

There have been several persuasive critiques of the 'embourgeoisement thesis' interpretation of the impact of mass culture. Most notable is Lisabeth Cohen's work on Chicago, which challenges the idea that mass culture had succeeded in integrating American workers into a mainstream, middle-class culture, where watching a movie or turning on the radio meant they 'ceased living in an ethnic or working class world'.[35] Indeed, her work suggests that mass culture actually strengthened bonds among workers. However, the fact remains that by the 1920s there existed a widely held perception that Americans were united in their pursuit and acquisition of what was termed a 'middle-class' lifestyle, something that was defined in part by consumer behaviour. Furthermore, discourse on class and consumption in America is inextricably bound up with ideas about citizenship and national identity. As Lila Berman notes in her 2007 exploration of American Jews, the terminology of middle-classness has increasingly been used as 'shorthand for that which was most fundamentally American'.[36] As a result, even in the present day, the vast majority of Americans see themselves as part of a middle-class majority.[37] The idea of a normative middle-class mainstream that was consolidated and enlarged by the advent of mass culture was a powerful cultural trope in the 1920s and beyond, and should inform historians' understanding of class awareness and social hierarchies in the period. My research examines the

America (New York, NY, 1994); Richard Wightman Fox, T. J. Jackson Lears, and Jackson T. Lears, *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York, 1983).

[35] Lizabeth Cohen, 'Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s', *American Quarterly*, 41 (March 1989), p. 7; An earlier article that raises many of the same points discussed by Cohen is James W. Rinehart, 'Affluence and the Embourgeoisement of the Working Class: A Critical Look', *Social Problems*, 19 (1971), pp. 149–162.

[36] Lila Corwin Berman, 'American Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness', *American Jewish History*, 93 (2007), p. 414.

[37] Linkon and Russo, 'Class Confusions', p. 367. See also Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, Hofstadter, The Age of Reform, Daniel Boorstin, The Americans: the democratic experience (Random House, 1973).

part the comics played in perpetuating the myth of the normative white middle-class,

demonstrating how the strips used social satire to explore the definition of, and limitations to,

middle-class identity.

Race and citizenship

The Progressive Era was a crucial period in the forging of American citizenship, as debates over

female suffrage, black disenfranchisement in the South and immigration restriction contributed

to an overall sense of upheaval in understandings of the rights and responsibilities associated

with access to American citizenship. In recent years, historians have sought to tackle the

difficult question of where and how to situate American nativism and racism in the country's

broader intellectual civic traditions, seeking to explain the politics of exclusion that has been

present throughout much of America's history.[38] Several scholars have demonstrated that

American democracy has always relied on racially ascriptive ideologies in order to dictate who

could (and who could not) have access to the privilege and power of American citizenship.[39] For

instance, Rogers Smith's *Civic Ideals* is a thought-provoking examination of how American

officials have legally defined American citizenship, which concludes that 'through most of US

history, lawmakers pervasively and unapologetically structured U.S. citizenship in terms of

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[38] Louis Hartz's 1955 thesis, *The Liberal Tradition in America,* has been extremely influential in American historiography, providing a blueprint for narratives of American history that stress liberalism, inclusion and democracy.
[39] Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (New Jersey, 2004); Wendy Wall, *Inventing the 'American Way': The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford, 2009); James Hampshire, *The Politics of Immigration: Contradictions of the Liberal State* (Cambridge, 2014); Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, 1997); Ali Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* (Durham, N.C., 2005); Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (1992); Ira Katznelson, 'Civic Ideals', *Political Theory*, 27 (1999), pp. 565–570.

illiberal and undemocratic racial, ethnic and gender hierarchies, for reasons rooted in basic,

enduring imperatives of political life'.[40] Similarly, Ali Behdad's *A Forgetful Nation* expounds

the part played by mid nineteenth-century nativism in legitimating xenophobia as a form of

national belonging and community building.[41] Like Smith, Behdad identifies competing

perceptions of national identity, which instead of undoing or undermining one another coexist

and reinforce one another 'through historical amnesia.'[42] Both studies successfully demonstrate

the uneasy but persistent presence of nativism as an integral part of America's broader liberal,

democratic and republican traditions, a coexistence never more apparent than in the Progressive

era of immigration restriction.

Both of these excellent studies focus on political culture and legislation without paying much

attention to the way in which ordinary people defined their collective national identity. Smith

justifies his focus on federal legislation as a source base on the grounds that the political elites

who crafted it have literally constituted the American civic community, and their rationales have

for that reason expressed politically important elements in American thought.[43] He believes that

it would be 'seriously misleading' to write as if the views of those who were ineligible to hold

political office shaped American citizenship laws as much as the views of those who did possess

such prerogatives.[44] The problem with this approach is that historians too often write about 'the

American character' solely as it was articulated by the political elite, making the assumption that

their expression of American attitudes must therefore be representative of the wider constituency

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[40] Smith, *Civic Ideals*, p. 1.
[41] Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation*, p. 117.
[42] Ibid., p. 17.
[43] Smith, *Civic Ideals*, p. 7.
[44] Ibid., p. 7.

they served. Studying the extent to which intellectual attitudes were translated and adapted into the American humour popularised (and – arguably – created) by the comic strips gives a much more rounded picture of the development of American nationalism than one relying solely on the writing and records of the political and intellectual elite. My approach views comic artists as social commentators who – whether consciously or not – influenced, and were influenced by, popular racial discourse. As such, it also engages with the rich literature on the cultural history of race and citizenship in this period.[45]

Treating the comic strip as a lens onto the way Americans though about race, ethnicity, and citizenship also brings together several strands of immigration history. Between 1880 and 1910, nearly 18 million immigrants, the majority from Eastern and Southern Europe, came to the United States.[46] By 1910, nearly 15 percent of the American population was foreign-born, and by 1909, more than half the children in the nation's largest cities were either immigrants or the children of immigrants – indeed, in some places the figure was closer to three quarters.[47] Consequently, the Progressive Era saw heightened debate about racial classifications of the immigrants that had, until the late nineteenth century, entered the country with almost no restrictions.[48] There is a large and well-established body of scholarship on the immigration

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[45] See for example Orm Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870-1930* (Urbana, 2000); Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986); Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York, 1990); Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2002); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890 - 1940* (New York, 1999).
[46] John Powell, *Encyclopedia of North American Immigration* (New York, 2009), p. 390.
[47] Powell, *Encyclopedia of North American Immigration*, p. 363; Roger Daniels, *Not Like Us: Immigrants and Minorities in America, 1890-1924* (Chicago, 1997), p. 89.
[48] Linda Joyce Brown, *The Literature of Immigration and Racial Formation: Becoming White, Becoming Other, Becoming American in the Late Progressive Era* (New York, 2004).

restriction movement that culminated in the 1924 Immigration Act, which limited immigration

levels to 150,000 per year and barred almost all immigration from Asia.[49] Concerned by the

effect that the influx of 'new' immigrants would have on the American character, many

Progressive-era politicians, philosophers and scientists were preoccupied by the comparative

traits of people with different racial, national and religious backgrounds, and ideas about

citizenship and democracy were closely bound up with 'scientific' thinking on race and

eugenics.[50]

Most historiography on this subject has focused on legislation, political movements and

intellectual movements like Social Darwinism, restricting itself to elite and academic literature.

John Higham's seminal work, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism*, first

published in 1955, changed the nature of the field by attempting to chart the existence of anti-

immigrant, nativist sentiment among the American people.[51] Higham identified several

'nativisms', which varied across space and time, and his findings still heavily influence historical

research. However, as was recently noted in a review article by Timothy Meagher, Higham drew

heavily on East Coast, middle-class journals like *Atlantic Monthly* and the *North American*, but

made little or no attempt to explore the vast array of 'popular culture' sources that would have

enabled working-class Americans to be represented in his research.[52] With readers from across

the social spectrum, the comic strip offers an ideal site to reconsider some of the questions raised

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[49] Dale T. Knobel, *America for the Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York : London, 1996); Thomas C. Holt, 'Marking Race, Race-Making, and the Writing of History', *The American Historical Review*, 100 (1995), pp. 1–20.
[50] Desmond S. King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass. London, 2002), p. 1.
[51] John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, 2002).
[52] Timothy Meagher, 'Revisiting John Higham's Strangers in the Land: Comment', *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 11 (April 2012), p. 285.

in *Strangers in the Land,* and measure the extent to which scientific racism and nativism shaped the popular discourse – or indeed discourses – represented by the humour of the funny paper.[53]

In the last few decades a burgeoning scholarship has emerged under the loose banner of 'whiteness studies', its proponents seeking to refocus questions about immigration experience by reframing the debates about assimilation and nativism within an explicitly racial framework. A key contribution of this school of thought is the foregrounding of the processes by which whiteness as a normative racial category has been constructed in different historical contexts. Notable whiteness historians like David Roediger, Matthew Frye Jacobson and Nell Irvin Painter have sought to demonstrate the fractured and problematic nature of the term 'whiteness', arguing that the definition of 'white' has at times been highly contested.[54] They have suggested that at certain points in American history, various immigrant groups (including eastern European Jews, the Irish and Italians) were perceived as having more in common with blacks than whites. Several historians have then framed the efforts by immigrants to assimilate within a 'wop to white' framework, telling how immigrants became at once American *and* white.[55]

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[53] One recent work by Justin Nordstrom has sought to investigate the prevalence of nativism in print culture. Nordstrom looks at ten anti-Catholic newspapers from 1910 to 1919. He concludes – in contrast to Higham –that it was their Catholicism and not their status as immigrants that caused many Catholic immigrants to come under attack. Justin Nordstrom, *Danger on the Doorstep: Anti-Catholicism and American Print Culture in the Progressive Era* (Notre Dame, Ind, 2006).

[54] David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White ; The Strange Journey From Ellis Island To The Suburbs* (New York, 2006); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York, 2010).

[55] Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890 - 1945* (Oxford, 2004), p. 7.

With a few notable exceptions, whiteness scholars have tended to conflate the terms 'white' and 'American', using them interchangeably to recast the process of Americanization as a grand narrative in which immigrants sought to 'become white', while native-born onlookers viewed newcomers' otherness in explicitly racial terms. These narratives struggle to include the acculturation movement that sought to teach immigrants to be good Americans – suggesting citizenship was based on behaviour and not biology – or explain the endurance of immigrant communities and customs well into the twentieth century.[56] Only a limited few acknowledge the strong bonds felt among workers of different ethnic backgrounds, or the role of religion in creating ethnic stereotypes.[57] Furthermore, these narratives do not fully address the inherent conflict in Progressive-Era race thinking – and in its historiography – of whether white ethnics were seen as fundamentally different from other Americans on a racial and biological level, or whether they could through their own choices adopt an American identity by choosing the new culture over their old one.

A handful of interesting studies applying a whiteness framework to strips created by immigrant comic artists have been published in recent years. Richard Moss's prizewinning 2007 article on racial anxiety in Harry Herschfield's *Abie the Agent* concludes that the strip was 'an effort to cast Jews—and newly arrived immigrants, especially—as patriotic, upwardly mobile citizens, and, more sinisterly, a suggestion that Jews were better than the other racial and ethnic minorities that were the subjects of scorn and caricature in the decades before Abe's appearance'.[58] Moss is

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[56] Cohen, 'Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots'.
[57] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*.
[58] Richard Moss, 'Racial Anxiety on the Comics Page: Harry Hershfield's 'Abie the Agent,' 1914-1940', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40 (February 2007), p. 2.

heavily influenced by whiteness scholarship – and in particular the social and cultural process through which immigrants acquired the 'wage' of white privilege – and his efforts to demonstrate Abe's 'racial anxiety', and thus provide a coherent interpretation of the strip, result in the over-simplification of what is actually a very complex body of material. Furthermore, Moss occasionally ignores instances of *Abie* that contradict his interpretation.

A more nuanced study on Irish immigrant culture as portrayed in the comic strips is Kerry Soper's 2005 examination of *Bringing Up Father*.[59] Soper is less interested than Moss in demonstrating a clear 'whiteness' narrative. His article is an insightful examination of the way in which 'its comedy articulated for audiences conflicted or ambivalent cultural attitudes towards assimilation, the Protestant work ethic, and materialist conceptions of the American dream'.[60] For Soper, the comic's protagonist Jiggs's principal function is to help a variety of reading audiences to negotiate cultural pressures and anxieties by wearing the mask of ethnic caricature lightly, playing scapegoat, sympathetic everyman, romantic ethnic other, wise fool, and subversive trickster simultaneously.[61] Building on the work by Moss and Soper, my MA dissertation compared the use of ethnic humour in *Bringing Up Father* and *Abie the Agent* from 1913 to 1930, finding very little evidence in either of these two strips of attempts to demonstrate Irish or Jewish claims to whiteness, or any kind of racial anxiety about being seen as 'not quite white'. I concluded that both strips fit a common pattern in which ethnic humour was used to reinforce race-based social hierarchies, while at the same time portraying ethnic characters as

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[59] Kerry Soper, 'Performing 'Jiggs': Irish Caricature and Comedic Ambivalence toward Assimilation and the American Dream in George McManus's Bringing Up Father', *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 4 (April 2005), pp. 173–213.
[60] Ibid., p. 176.
[61] Ibid., p. 213.

sympathetic, if not heroic.[62] Both of these strips were created by second generation immigrants as a means of depicting fictional versions of their own communities, but many more were drawn by Americans of differing backgrounds. Understanding how much creative license artists had to challenge the constraints of mainstream humour, and how far their personal backgrounds affected the jokes they told, is an important element of the production of the comic strip that has previously been largely unexplored, due to the absence of any significant academic work taking a comparative approach to the strips.

My research also engages with the expanding body of work of critical race theorists seeking to apply the principles of the field to academic and popular culture. While critical race theory originally emerged primarily as a prism through which to analyse the inherent racism of the American legal system, several of its findings are convincing when applied to mass culture.[63] The construction of white normativity can be achieved through the erasure of black culture, and the use of racial grammar (whiteness as universal, blackness as minority or other), 'color imagery' (association of skin colour with positive or negative traits) and stock stories (common tales used to explain social reality). These are all useful analytical tools when examining the comics.[64] Specifically, the syndicated comics industry perpetuated a conception of 'race neutrality', while at the same time operating in a way that functionally excluded non-white

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[62] Hilary Fraser, 'Immigrants, Ethnic Humour and the Newspaper Comic Strip, 1919-1930', MA thesis, (University of Sheffield, 2012).

[63] Kimberlee Crenshaw, 'Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory', *Connecticut Law Review,* Vol. 43, No. 5 (pp. 1253-1353).

[64] See Richard Delgado and Jean Stefanic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction.* Second edition. (NYU Press, 2012).

Americans.[65] The strips naturalised the notion of whiteness as the universal American norm, reproducing the paradigms that shored up the racial status quo.

Contribution

The comics as a national industry

Building on existing studies by Ian Gordon, Ralph Suiter and Elsa Nystrom, chapter one of this thesis builds a picture of the evolution of the comic industry, from the introduction of the first funny papers to the operations and working dynamics of the syndicates.[66] I trace the evolution of the comic strip form from its inception in 1895 through the introduction of syndication, examining the growth of the early comics industry. Using material from a special research collection on cartoons and cartoonists at Syracuse University Library and the extensive archives at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Museum and Library, I also explore the internal workings of the industry, examining the interactions between comic artists, syndicate reps and newspaper editors.

The development of the comic as a cultural medium in this period can be loosely divided into two main eras. The first period, starting with the publication of Richard Outcault's *Yellow Kid* in 1898, was one of experimentation and consolidation. Comic artists and newspaper moguls William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer experimented with how to use the new features to sell tabloid Sunday newspapers in big cities. Many of the strips were aimed at children and the

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[65] Crenshaw, 'Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory', p.1260.
[66] See Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945* (Washington, D.C, 1998); Ralph Suiter, ''Vulgarizing American Children': Navigating Respectability and Commercial Appeal in Early Newspaper Comics' (George Mason University, 2016); Elsa Ann Nystrom, 'A Rejection of Order, the Development of the Newspaper Comic Strip in America, 1830-1920, Ph.D. thesis (University of Chicago 1989).

semi-literate, and featured children and animals as their protagonists, exploring colourful urban themes and settings. Around 1907, as the comic supplement became established in many papers across the country and the first daily strip was born, a gradual shift towards producing strips aimed more decisively at adults began. In the second period (from around 1912) more comics featuring suburban families and covering adult topics were produced, so that prior to the birth of the comic superhero in the 1930s the majority of characters in the newspaper comic strips were 'normal' Americans from all walks of life. Storylines focused on everyday occurrences and, as commentators noted, provided 'a picture of a comical happening right in our own home or our own office.'[67]

The 1910s also saw the widespread national syndication of the comic strips. Gordon (whose conclusions are widely cited by other comics scholars) sought to demonstrate the national influence of the comic genre by mapping out how many newspapers in a limited sample carried a comics section of any kind. [68] Due in large part to the digitisation of hundreds of American newspapers since Gordon's research, I have been able to expand this analysis, documenting which strips appeared in which papers and when, thus establishing a much clearer picture of how quickly individual comics (as opposed to comics in general) became shared cultural artefacts across the geographical United States. This dissertation maps out the geographical distribution of several strips across the period from 1905 to 1935, to identify patterns in content distribution across the country.

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[67] 'Maker of Comics gets $150,000', *Logan Republican* (29 April 1916).
[68] Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945*.

The comic strips quickly spread across America, meaning Americans from vastly different walks of life could consume the same narratives simultaneously. This rapid spread was abetted by syndication and the comics acquired enormous cultural salience. Yet syndication itself had unexpected effects. Growth weakened the independence of hitherto autonomous cartoonists and actually constrained the topics they could cover. Their portrayal of 'mainstream' American life was therefore driven in part by the demands of the syndicates to maximise their market and avoid alienating readers. The impact of this development had far-reaching consequences, which are documented in chapters two and three.

The comics' content and American identity

The goal of this thesis was always to understand how the comics reflected, shaped and perpetuated the ways that Americans understood their own lives and how they acted as a cultural space for discourses on social hierarchies (race, gender and class in particular) to be variably dissected, discussed, mocked and embraced. As Steven Ross noted in relation to using film as a historical source, 'the repetition of similar images over and over again until they become commonplace does create a way of seeing the world - a discourse - that appears as the dominant reality to many Americans'.[69] Millions of Progressive-Era Americans read the same comics every morning, spending a few minutes each day to catch up with their favourite characters and chuckle at the day's jokes. It would be overstating the influence of the comics to suggest that they single-handedly shaped Americans' opinions: it seems unlikely that a wife would cite the behaviour of Andy Gump or Tom Duff in an argument with her husband, or that a man would

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[69] Steven J. Ross, 'American Workers, American Movies: Historiography and Methodology', *International Labor and Working-Class History* (2001), p. 82.

decide to buy a car specifically because someone had the same one in *Gasoline Alley*. However,

as with any type of widely-proliferated cultural media, the way that the strips depicted American

life is important in two ways: first as a reflector of social norms (the world in the comics needed

to be recognisable and identifiable in order to resonate with its audience) and second as a shaper

of them. In this regard, the function of the comics can be likened to other visual media like

advertisements, creating a way of seeing the world that overlaps with everyday experiences. The

way that the strips used humour to draw social boundaries around class and race is examined in

chapters two and three.

Class

In chapter two, I highlight the complicated way that the strips functioned to both construct and

undermine cultural discourse on what constituted the American 'mainstream', particularly after

the introduction of the (often dismissed as 'bland') domestic family strips of the 1910s. The

introduction of strips set in the middle-class suburbs, starting with *Polly and Her Pals* in 1912,

did not mean a move towards bland and uninteresting subject matter. In fact, these strips provide

a rich source base for historians to examine the cultural construction of normative values in the

period. The comics in this period may have depicted the popular vision – propounded by admen

– of a large and seemingly accessible white middle-class mainstream. But they did not simply

celebrate or quiescently accept the dominant values associated with that group. Rather, through

subtle subversion and not-so-subtle satire, the funnies drew attention to the conflicts and

complexities of American class identity.

A crucial element of this satire was in the comics' treatment of the related ideas of social mobility and status anxiety, which was a dominant theme in several of the strips. Characters' fears over both downwards social movement and exposure as social frauds highlighted the fragility of class hierarchies, and exposed inherent tensions in the cultural trope of the American Dream. While the strips drew clear connections between membership of the middle-class mainstream and consumption behaviours, they also highlighted the role of cultural capital – the specific social and personal attributes of a person that afforded them entry into that group. Thus a constant tension existed between the idea of unrestricted social movement based on acquisition of wealth and consumer choices, and the idea that some people could be identified as social frauds, their inherently 'lowbrow' nature suggesting that they did not belong.

The changing roles and expectations for men and women were also a significant theme, with the strips exploring the connection between gender identity and middle-class success throughout the period. The comics' use of the suburban family home as the primary setting in several strips led to the inclusion of female lead characters, but also ensured their confinement to the domestic sphere, reinforcing women's 'natural' role as wives and homemakers at the same time as they gained greater freedoms in American society after World War One. Gender construction is discussed in both Chapters two and three, as the way the comics treated black characters was also inherently gendered.

Race

White supremacist politics, nativism and racism were entrenched in the very fabric of Progressive-era society, structuring the legal system and disseminated in books, on the stage and

in the movies. Chapter three examines the way that comic artists navigated the period's complex and contradictory discourses on race and citizenship, in the context of the industry's purported efforts not to alienate or offend readers from across the social – and racial – spectrum. It draws on the work of critical race theorists and whiteness scholars, examining the role of the comic strips in the production of broader structures of racial power.[70] As Kimberlee Crenshaw argues, cultural products 'contribute epistemic authority to the naturalized structures of thought and action that constitute racial hierarchy'.[71] As a growing mass culture medium, the comics played an important – if not obviously deliberate – role in the ongoing process by which whiteness was made normative.[72]

Indeed, comic artists' attempts to avoid what they saw as the 'problem' of race had likely unintended consequences. The strips treated race in a much more binary fashion – based on a black/white dichotomy – than did the surrounding political and academic discourses of the day. There is very little evidence of Jacobson's 'variegated whiteness' in the strips, or any indication that immigrants should be viewed as a racial 'other'. Deliberately racist humour was also noticeably rare in the comics, with only a few examples of obviously antagonistic or supremacist racial humour in a sample of over 26,000 individual strips. There are very few instances of strips attacking black or immigrant characters or using racist language. In an era whose white audiences celebrated the release of *Birth of a Nation*, this is quite surprising.

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[70] See Crenshaw, 'Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory', p.1262.
[71] Ibid, p.1310.
[72] Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, p.86.

It should be made very clear that this is not the story of a forward-thinking industry of liberal

progressives, crusading to challenge racial boundaries and promote racial equality. While comic

artists largely avoided making jokes that they perceived as too offensive by their own standards,

the concept of race – for example a black man's arm being hidden from view on a dark night –

was used to structure hundreds of gags throughout the entire period. These jokes, while not

'racist' in the sense that they did not attack or even criticise the black character, ultimately

served to validate the use of racial difference as a means of structuring society, and demonstrate

the ubiquity of race-thinking in the American creative industry. In this way, they contributed to

what E. Bonilla-Silva refers to as 'racial grammar': the organisation of culture into a normative

field of racial transactions, where whiteness is universal and non-racial, and the standard against

which black otherness is defined.[73]

Furthermore, the strips relied on a selection of well-established black stereotypes that had their

roots in plantation cultural tropes. The socially subservient position of black characters, and

particularly black men, was used as a means of shoring up the racial superiority of the white

mainstream, meaning that the comics ultimately reinforced society's division into 'white' and

'other', with the construction of white normativity achieved in part through the disappearing of

white ethnicity and the othering of blackness.

In addition, while the comics did little to undermine the racial position of white ethnics, the

desire to avoid the 'problem' of race also had consequences for the treatment of immigrant

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[73] E. Bonilla-Silva, 'More than Prejudice: Restatement, Reflections and New Directions in Critical Race Theory', *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity,* Vol 1, No. 1 (2015) p. 78.

groups in the strips. In the majority of the strips in this study, white ethnics were noticeably absent, absorbed into the American melting pot so effectively that they no longer retained any identifiable ethnic traits. White ethnics existed only in their own separate strips. The two strips – *Abie the Agent* and *Bringing Up Father* – created by immigrant artists and featuring obviously immigrant protagonists were like ethnic micro-societies, again serving to illustrate that hyphenated Americans, while clearly not black, did not belong in the American mainstream, in which American identity was defined in white, middle-class terms.

Sources and methodology

Comics used in the study

In chapters one (on the comics industry) and four (on the strips' cultural impact) I use archival material relating to a wide variety of comic strips and their creators. In the two chapters analysing the comics' content, I focus my attention on a dozen strips, chosen because of their geographical reach, their impact on other forms of popular culture and their renown.[74] The first, *Hogan's Alley/The Yellow Kid* ran from 1895 to 1898 and was created by Richard Fenton

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[74] When I began this research, I sought to choose a selection of strips based on three criteria: popularity, impact and content/topic. I made an initial shortlist by going through Ron Goulart's *Encyclopedia of American Comics*, noting titles of strips that were long-lasting and/or widely (and ideally internationally) distributed. I then looked at this shortlist and identified which of these strips were considered to be significant in either their impact on American culture or their subject matter. *The Yellow Kid* was the strip that began the comics era. *Katzenjammer Kids* was arguably the first long-running newspaper comic strip. *Mutt and Jeff* was the first daily. *The Gumps* and *Gasoline Alley* had extremely long runs, and were described as American favourites, as was *The Bungle Family*. All three of these purportedly depicted 'mainstream' America, in which I was especially interested. *Polly and Her Pals* and *Tillie the Toiler* were two of the first really popular strips with a female titular character. *Happy Hooligan, Abie the Agent* and *Bringing Up Father* touched on themes around ethnicity and race, and were created by comic artists of immigrant descent. When I started tracking these strips, I kept seeing Walter Allman's *Doings of the Duffs* – which was added to the sample in part due to my own intrigue at the relative lack of information on the strip, despite its appearance in a large number of papers.

Outcault. Often attributed as the inspiration for the term 'Yellow Journalism', the kid was a bald, 'oriental-looking' (but with an Irish name – Mickey Dugan) urchin in a yellow nightshirt and the protagonist of what historians generally consider to be the first successful newspaper comic series.[75] After Outcault moved from Pulitzer's *New York World* to join Hearst's *New York Journal* in 1896 he soon changed the name of the strip to that of its protagonist, with his replacement at the *World* continuing the *Hogan's Alley* strip for Pulitzer.[76] Rudolph Dirks, creator of *The Katzenjammer Kids,* developed the stylistic innovations made by Outcault with his new strip, which joined *The Yellow Kid* in the *Journal's* comic supplement in 1897. The strip featured the antics of German-American twins Hans and Fritz, as well as several sideline adult characters. The longest-running comic strip in history (it finished in 2006), *The Katzenjammer Kids* also existed in two versions after Dirks left Hearst's organization in 1913. The original strip was taken over by Rudolph Knerr, while Dirks produced an alternative comic with the same title characters, initially titled *Hans und Fritz*, but changing to *The Captain and the Kids* in 1918, for *The New York World*.[77]

The next two strips, which also began in the first phase of the comics, before syndication really took off, did not lead to any such legal wrangling and both belonged to the Hearst group. *Happy Hooligan* featured an optimistic but perennially unlucky hobo who constantly found himself in trouble with the law, and first appeared in the *New York Journal* in 1900. Its creator, Frederick Burr Opper, continued the strip (with intermittent breaks) until 1932. Originally a Sunday strip,

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[75] Ron Goulart, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Comics* (New York, 1990), p. 396.
[76] Ibid., p. 397.
[77] Ibid., p. 68.

Happy Hooligan also appeared as a daily series for periods in the 1920s.[78] Another early strip, the very first to appear as a daily, *Mutt and Jeff* was borne out of previous work by Bud Fisher, who would go on to be one of the most highly paid comic artists in history.[79] Mutt – a gambler – first appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle,* another Hearst paper, in 1907, and was joined by Jeff in 1908.[80] *Mutt and Jeff* continued its run until 1982.

The next group of strips all began in the 1910s, entering a well-established and thriving market. *Polly and Her Pals*, one of the first strips with a female character at its centre, debuted in 1912 under the name *Positive Polly.[81]* Influenced by the Cubist movement, its creator Cliff Sterrett had a unique style, distorting human features for comic effect. Sterrett ended the strip when he retired in 1958. George McManus's *Bringing Up Father* (mentioned above) joined the Hearst collection in 1913, when it first appeared in *The New York American.[82]* Its protagonists, Maggie (a laundrette worker), Jiggs (an Irish hod-carrier) and 'Daughter' had climbed the social ladder after striking it rich. Most of the comedy in the strip is derived from Maggie's constant efforts to 'better' her husband, and his stubborn resistance. The strip ran for 87 years, finishing in 2000. In 1914, Irish Jiggs was joined in the comic world by Jewish Abe Kabibble, who was the title character of *Abie the Agent.* His creator, Harry Hirschfield, was a proactive member of the American Jewish community, and aimed to use the strip to create a sympathetic Jewish character: a 'clean-cut-well-dressed specimen of Jewish humor' that would counter the

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[78] Ibid., p. 172.
[79] Milton Caniff, 'Production and Distribution', in Coupiere Pierre and Horn Maurice C., *A History of the Comic Strip* (New York, 1968), p. 139.
[80] Goulart, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, p. 270.
[81] Ibid., p. 295.
[82] Ibid., p. 51.

uncomplimentary Jewish stereotypes of vaudeville and Burlesque.[83] *Abie the Agent* was

distributed by Hearst's *King Features Syndicate*, but due to its use of Jewish humour and

dialogue has usually been perceived to have been primarily a strip aimed at audiences in large

cities.[84] Also starting in 1914 was a strip (and artist) that has somehow escaped entry in both Ron

Goulart's enormous *Encyclopedia of American Comic Strips* and, at the date of writing,

Wikipedia. Yet Walter Allman's *The Doings of the Duffs* was, according to an advert in *The*

Dixon Evening Leader, appearing in over 250 newspapers every day by 1918.[85]

Another strip about family life, *The Gumps* debuted in 1918 in the *Chicago Tribune,* based on an

idea conceived by Editor Joseph Medill Patterson and drawn by Sidney Smith.[86] The strip

started the fashion for introducing long-running stories that lasted weeks on end, and its

characters appeared on toys, advertised consumer goods, inspired a song and got their own radio

show in 1931.[87] The strip was retired in 1959, after its circulation dropped to fewer than 20

papers.[88] *Home Sweet Home,* better known by its later name *The Bungle Family*, ran from 1918

to 1945 and was picked up by the McNaught syndicate in 1923. Its creator Harry J. Tuthill used

the strip to consider the trials of American urban life, although by the 1930s he had started

covering a much wider range of issues. After stopping the strip for a few short periods in the

1930s, Tuthill finally retired *The Bungle Family* in 1945. In 1918, a strip was created specifically

to appeal to the growing proportion of the middle class public who, thanks to Henry Ford, owned

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[83] Harry Hershfield talk at Chicago Women's Institute, quoted in Appel, 'Jews in American caricature', p.15.
[84] Goulart, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, p. 1.
[85] 'Advert for 'Doings of the Duffs'', *Dixon Evening Leader* (12 January 1918).
[86] Goulart, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, p. 164.
[87] Ibid., p. 165.
[88] Ibid., p. 166.

cars. *Gasoline Alley* was drawn by Frank King at the request of Robert McCormick, the publisher of the *Chicago Tribune.* It began as a Sunday strip, set in an alley where men met to inspect and discuss their interest in automobiles. After 1919 it also ran daily, and unlike other strips it featured a cast of characters who aged over time – something that had never been done before.[89] A wholesome strip set in small-town America, *Gasoline Alley* was drawn by King until he retired in 1960. The strip continues today. Finally, in 1921, Russ Westover created *Tillie the Toiler*, a strip following the exploits of a glamorous and very modern working woman. The strip continued in both daily and weekly formats until 1959, a few years after Westover's retirement.

Created by artists from a wide range of social backgrounds, each with their own styles and agendas, these 12 strips nonetheless had to fulfil the same purpose: to sell papers. A proper understanding of their place within the wider history of American print culture, and indeed their role as a social educator of Progressive-era Americans, calls for an approach that considers the strips both individually and as a collective. As individual social artefacts, each strip tells its own specific story, and detailed analyses like those by Richard Moss and Kerry Soper provide valuable insights that can be built on and their findings applied to other strips. In this study, the particular circumstances affecting the production of each strip are always kept in mind, with an entire section devoted to the role of the artists as social commentators. However, I also treat the individual strips as part of a broader phenomenon, and believe that using a comparative approach to the strips, understanding what made each popular in certain areas for example, or why a newspaper editor chose to drop one in favour of another, enables us to piece together a much

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[89] Pierre Coupiere and Maurice C. Horn, *A History of the Comic Strip* (New York, 1968), p. 49.

bigger picture: the narrative of the development of an American national culture at the start of the twentieth century, and the place of humour in its creation.

In order to ensure I got a thorough picture of the content of a range of comics, published across the country by several of the big syndicators, I chose to use comics and not newspapers as my focal point.[90] As such, I chose to focus primarily on a selection of comics, chosen to represent a range of genres, artists and syndicates. Chapter one examines where all but one (*The Yellow Kid* had ceased publication by 1898) of these strips were published in order to track the rise of national syndication.[91] Chapters two and three analyse the content of these comics, an endeavour that involved reading and documenting over 26,000 individual strips. With a source base this large, it is not possible to comment on every single area that the strips cover. It would be possible to write a fairly detailed paper on how the comics depicted any number of things: from the mini golf fad that gripped the nation in the 1920s, to the portrayal of American tourists in Europe, to female fashion. The database of the strips' contents that I have created may enable such projects to take place in the future. When discussing trends, patterns and cultural tropes, it is not possible to neatly separate the comics up. While comic A, B and C may best illustrate the presentation of the suburban home, comic B, C and E could be used to discuss the role of the workplace, and

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[90] The alternative approach – which has been used by a few historians – would have been to study the comic supplement of one newspaper, examining whichever comics appeared in that paper. I decided against this for several reasons. First, this would have meant only looking at comics distributed by a single syndicate. Second, this would not have allowed me to track the regional distribution of the strips, something that was central to my argument that the strips contributed to the creation of a national visual culture. Third, I would have been limited by the decisions made by the editor of that paper over which strips to include, something which may have hindered the applicability of my research to the overall notion of a national culture.

[91] In order to build up a picture of the evolution of the comics industry in chapter one I was also heavily reliant on two large archival collections: a special collection on cartoon and cartoonists at Syracuse University Research Center, which holds the papers of several significant comic artists and syndicate operatives, and the vast archives of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum based at Ohio State University in Columbus.

comic A's treatment of urban leisure habits might be examined in isolation. Furthermore, each comic was created by a different artist (or artists) who had a different purpose in mind. It is necessary, therefore, to examine the comics individually and in small groups, as well as seeing them as part of a larger collection at times. I have tried to make it clear which comics are being used in each section of this work, and where single examples serve to illustrate a wider trend this has also been referenced.

Methodology: reception studies and theories of humour

A key consideration throughout this research is the relationship between the comic artists who produced the strips, the syndicate bosses who commissioned them, the editors who bought them for their papers and the millions of people that made up their readership. Reception studies literature provides several potential frameworks within which to situate this relationship. These emphasise the idea that meaning is not fixed or given, but is rather created at least in part through the process by which a text or cultural product is read by its audience. Audiences bring with them their own assumptions and beliefs, which inform their readings and may mean their interpretation of what they read or see is different to that which the producer or creator intended. Reception theory built on the efforts of Hans Robert Jauss to apply the reader-response theory to 'texts', emphasising the scope for the audience to negotiate their own interpretations over a period of time in history, their interpretations linking to the linguistic and aesthetic expectations of the readers at various times.[92]

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[92] See Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception,* translated by Timothy Bahti (University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

Since its inception in the 1970s, reception theory has been applied to literature, advertising, the bible, theatre, television and film.[93] There are several schools of thought over the role of the audience in creating cultural meaning. At opposing ends of the scholarly spectrum, the Frankfurt school claims that the cultural industry has made the audience passive, whereas the cultural studies approach argues that audiences are active participants who make their own choices on how to consume the ideas they encounter in literature.[94] Similarly, as Janet Staiger explains, media studies approaches see the media consumer as a producer, actively choosing to select media that is useful and gratifying to them, or even resisting intended readings and creating their own interpretations.[95] Broadly speaking, reception theory requires us to acknowledge the fact that meaning is not simply passively accepted by an audience. Instead, the reader/viewer interprets the meanings of the text based on his or her own frame of reference, including individual cultural background and life experiences. A text's meaning is therefore not inherent within the text itself, but is created within the relationship between the text and the reader.

In considering the reading of the comic strips, I am most convinced by the theoretical position of Stuart Hall, whose influential encoding/decoding model – first outlined in 1973 – provides a useful methodology.[96] Hall's thesis was developed in reference to television but is broadly

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[93] See for example James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein, *Reception Study: from Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (Psychology Press, 2001), James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein, *New Directions in Reception Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 'Audiencing: A cultural studies approach to watching television', *Poetics,* Vol. 21 Issue 4, pp. 345-359, Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class: The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Harvard University Press, 1980).
[94] Machor and Goldstein, *New Directions in Reception Studies,* p.vv
[95] Janet Staiger, 'Kiss Me Deadly: Cold War Threats from Spillane to Aldrich, New York to Los Angeles, and the Mafia to the H-Bomb', in Machor and Goldstein, *New Directions in Reception Studies,* p.280.
[96] Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/decoding, in S. Hall , D. Hobson, A. Lowe and P. Willis, eds., *Culture, Media, Language* (London, 1980) , pp. 128-138.

applicable to any form of mass media. He posits that media producers 'must yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse. The institution-societal relations of production must pass under the discursive rules of language for its product to be "realized"'.[97] Ergo, for the audience to interpret a text (or comic strip) even inside the framework of their own experience, they must be able to appropriate it into a meaningful discourse. In a mass culture context, this discourse therefore needs some degree of universality. Thus meanings are encoded into a text by its producers, and then decoded by its audience. In order for this process occur, both parties must share a basic understanding of the underlying codes used to structure the discourse. These codes work together to form what Hall calls 'common-sense constructs', which constitute a dominant cultural order.[98] While these are by no means unequivocal or uncontested by all readers, the vast majority of exchanges between producer and consumer of a text must contain some common ground (or 'reciprocity between encoding and decoding moments') in order to facilitate an effective communicative exchange.[99] It is my contention that the comic strips in this study both relied on existing and helped to reinforce new codes, building on existing cultural norms to attribute meaning to both the visual and linguistic elements of the strips. Given how short the strips were – a daily included just three or four panels with some speech and a single strapline – it is clear how heavily they relied on these 'reference codes' to convey meaning.

The role of the syndicates, as an early example of mass media, in creating and reinforcing these codes is clearly significant. Cultural studies approaches have assumed that in today's society, the mass media reproduces the ideological beliefs and gender, race, class and ethnic biases of a

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[97] Ibid, p.118.
[98] Ibid, p. 123.
[99] Ibid, p. 124.

dominant class, to such an extent that what passes for reality is largely socially constructed.[100] Furthermore, when considering the role of advertising (which was a key concern for the comics industry) in mass media, political economy approaches emphasise the goal of mass media organisations to create audiences who become consumers of goods and services advertised alongside cultural products, and not just the encoded messages in the cultural products themselves.[101] Both of these viewpoints over emphasise the hegemonic role of mass media, assuming that a 'text' is responsible for the activities of its readers, who are passive receivers of a given message.[102] However, it is clear that the role of the burgeoning comics syndication industry in helping to create a cultural construction of the reality of American life is worth consideration, even if we accept that audiences did not uncritically accept that worldview.

Notwithstanding, I do believe that when creating their strips, comic artists intended to articulate a specific meaning and assumed that their audiences would interpret it in a particular way.[103] Successful comics in this genre made people laugh, and they did so by constructing humour using a frame of reference that they believed their audiences would understand and respond to in a predictable way. No single strip in this study accurately reflected the complex reality of twentieth-century of American life for ordinary people. However, the caricatured reality of the comic page did, in various ways, create humour by playing with the social norms that structured the society of their readers. In doing so, comic artists engaged with coded social discourse for the purposes of quickly creating a recognisable humour set up. When analysing the content of the

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[100] Norman K. Denzin, Review of J. Cruz and J. Lewis, *Viewing, Reading, Listening,* Social Forces, 76:3 (March 1998) p.1164.
[101] Ibid, pp.1164-5.
[102] Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?,* p.8.
[103] Staiger, 'Kiss Me Deadly', p. 285.

comics, then, we must be mindful of the dual function of 'normalcy' in humour, appreciating the complex process of constructing and encoding reality, and then subverting its rules for the purposes of eliciting a laugh. The conclusions we draw from analysing the content of the strips hang largely on the social function of humour and the fact that the strips were, ultimately, designed to be funny. It is therefore important to separate out the comedic elements of the strip - the behaviours or incidents being ridiculed or poked fun at, which are charged with meaning - from the contextual information that can indicate underlying attitudes or fashions. The comics in this period were deliberately set in largely quotidian situations. As such certain things, like the presence of a piano in a sitting room as an indicator of a middle-class home, are relatively uncomplicated. Unpicking the subtleties of the joke element is more difficult, and depends to a certain extent on the subjective interpretation of the person reading the strip. Particularly with reference to actions and behaviour, it could be argued that the strips were intended to reinforce the message they convey (for example conspicuous consumption as a means of achieving social success) or undermining it by making it the punchline of the joke.[104] In both scenarios, we may reason that the behaviour itself is both recognisable and identifiable to the intended audience, and thus has some social meaning.

As an example, consider a theoretical comedic set up in which there is a power cut and light is limited. The doorbell goes and the man in the scene, in a rush to get dressed, pulls some clothes out of the wardrobe and rushes downstairs to open the door. As he opens the door, it is revealed that he is wearing a pink, frilly nightdress and open-toed satin slippers. Treating the scene as a

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[104] This links to the argument made by John Fiske that 'culture may secure the social order and help to hold it in place, or it may destabilise it and work towards changing it, but it is never either neutral or detached'. See Fiske, 'Audiencing', p. 353.

straightforward representation of cultural mores, we could make the deduction that a pink

nightdress and slippers were common male attire in the period featured. However, with the

knowledge that the intent of the scene is to elicit a laugh, our interpretation is different. At a

basic level, the humour is derived from the incongruity of the scenario, and in the implicit

understanding that men don't usually wear pink dresses. Its function as a joke is to reflect and

reinforce the gendered meanings we associate with clothing. Perhaps, depending on the context,

it might indicate a wider interest in, or concern over, masculine identity. Either way, in a joke or

jest set up, historians can find evidence of cultural norms and social attitudes and behaviours

from both straightforward representation and subversion of the status quo for comedic effect.

Theorists of humour agree that jokes are a powerful tool for defining the norms and values

associated with a dominant culture. In order to understand a joke, its audience must have an

implicit understanding of the societal standards and expectations used as the reference point to

create its punchline. As Derek Brewer argues, the nature of most jokes is to reinforce the

standards of a dominant group and exclude 'others' who, by not conforming to that group's

social codes, become the butt of the joke.[105] With such a large, geographically and socially

diverse audience, many of whom accessed the comics on an almost daily basis over the course of

several years, comic strips provide a unique insight into the development of ideas about

collective American identity. They enable historians to consider how far intellectual discourse on

race, democracy and citizenship shaped the way that millions of Americans from different

backgrounds understood the norms – and boundaries – of their national culture. Understanding

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[105] Derek Brewer, 'Prose Jest-Books Mainly in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries in England', in Jan Bremner and Herman Roodenburg, eds., *A Cultural History of Humour from Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 90.

the way that the strips were created and received, as well as analysing their content, provides a rich and complex picture of the negotiations that took place between comic artists, syndicate bosses, newspaper editors and their readers as they created, read and attributed meaning to the strips.

The chapters that follow argue that the comics played a formative role in the cultural construction of a dominant American mainstream structured around white middle-class values, while also functioning as a contested space in which ideas about gender, race, class and identity could be explored and developed. The strips did not simply reflect American society, or uncritically perpetuate a single social vision. While they were not 'political' in the same way as the editorial cartoons from which they evolved, many were nonetheless sophisticated examples of social satire, using humour to undermine and problematise the values of the same American mainstream that they helped to define. In particular, the world of the strips demonstrates a high level of social preoccupation with the idea of social standing, with status anxiety expressed in terms of class and gender but never race. The privilege of whiteness is, in the world of the comics, clear and unmistakeable whereas membership of the middle-class mainstream is fraught with ambiguity.

Chapter 1: The Comics Industry and Mass Culture

Calvin Coolidge did not, for a while, understand the spread of newspaper syndication. One day, lunching at the White House with Arthur Brisbane, who is broadcast in several hundred papers, he said: "You know Brisbane, I had no idea the Washington Herald is so widely circulated. You have a few lines about me in your column and I get clippings and letters from all over the United States."

– Arthur Brisbane, printed in the editorial section of the *Bryan Daily Eagle*, 24th March 1930.

By 1930, the syndication of content across American newspapers had becoming a thriving business. Editors of newspapers across the country could supplement their own local stories by purchasing a selection of news items, popular fiction, editorial material, art and comic strips from large syndicates, who directly employed a team of writers and artists to produce material exclusively for distribution by the syndicate. As a result, American people across the entire breadth of the country had access to much of the same material on a daily basis, even if they were reading it in different papers. The syndication of comic strips is of particular interest to historians of American mass culture, due simply to the strips' incredible popularity. In 1929, an Iowa newspaper wanted to gain a better understanding of the relative popularity of the features they ran amongst readers, so they carried out a survey to find out their readers' preferences, asking them to rank the entire list of the paper's features. Seven out of the top ten features –

including both first and second place - were comics.[1] The syndicated humour comic in American newspapers was a key component of the wider story of the consolidation of American mass culture in this period, and the process by which it came into being, and evolved into a widely accessed cultural artefact, is worth greater attention than it has previously been given.

During the twentieth century, America underwent a profound transformation. The nation developed a sense of American uniqueness, an 'American Way' consolidated around a standardised popular culture that reached across geographical and social divides. This process was aided by the syndication of comic features. Elsa Nystrom, in a PhD thesis on the emergence of American comics, asserts that the most significant period in the rise of the syndicated strip was 1915-1920, during which time newspaper syndicates as we know them today became recognisable.[2] This later period was certainly formative in the consolidation and expansion of the comic industry. Yet even as early as 1902, less than a decade after the first serialised humour strip was published, references can be found in local newspapers across the country to caricatures and stock jokes made commonplace by the 'funny papers', demonstrating the breadth of their influence from an early date.[3] Large increases in newspaper readership, combined with the strips' growing popularity, meant that by 1910 they had gained a significant cultural foothold and by 1920 the comic page had become a national institution. Its immense distribution was unequalled by that of any other form of expression, artistic or literary.[4]

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[1] 'The Comic Strip Mind', *Waterloo Evening Courier* (28 January 1929).
[2] Elsa Ann Nystrom, 'A Rejection of Order, the Development of the Newspaper Comic Strip in America, 1830-1920', Ph.D. thesis (University of Chicago 1989).
[3] 'Passing Throng', *Atlanta Constitution* (4 June 1902).
[4] Pierre Coupiere and Maurice C. Horn, *A History of the Comic Strip* (New York, 1968), p. 64.

The antebellum expansion of American print culture had accelerated after the Civil War, with a five-fold increase in the number of magazines produced between 1865 and 1885.[5] This rapid growth was also evident in the newspaper industry: by 1900, 639 Sunday papers were coming from the presses, with 567 being issued by owners of dailies and 72 by independents.[6] As Charles Johanningsmeier asserts, by the turn of the century, newspapers had become a part of the lives of almost every American.[7] Several technological innovations helped to fuel this growth, including the invention of the Linotype machine (which produced an entire line of metal type at once, as compared to the previous standard twentieth of each letter being produced individually), first used in 1886.[8] As a result of this and other innovations, the price of newsprint dropped from eight cents per pound in 1870 to one cent per pound by 1900, enabling the production of cheaper papers aimed at working-class audiences.[9] In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the first syndicate companies began operations, competing with the lifestyle magazines by distributing fiction (often sections of novels) across the United States, from headquarters in New York and other East Coast cities.[10]

Writing in the *Journal of Educational Sociology* in 1945, Roger Penn Cuff theorised that nineteenth century 'editorial' cartoonists focused on political rather than social matter because of the nation's youth and interest in its own governmental progress. He wrote that America 'had not yet built a rich set of social conventions. Cartoonists naturally, therefore, seized upon

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[5] Stanley Kobre, *The Yellow Press, and Gilded Age Journalism* (Tallahassee, 1964), p. 21.
[6] Ibid., p. 21.
[7] Charles Johanningsmeier, *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace: the Role of Newspaper Syndicates in America, 1860-1900* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 2.
[8] Kobre, *The Yellow Press, and Gilded Age Journalism*, p. 314.
[9] Ibid., p. 324.
[10] http://www.toonopedia.com/katzen.htm//www.toonopedia.com/katzen.htm; Johanningsmeier, *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace*, p. 3.

political issues more readily than upon problems primarily social or economic.'[11] While many historians would likely question Pen Cuff's certainty that Gilded Age Americans did not yet have a set of social conventions to question and satirise, it is certainly difficult to find evidence of a sense of collective American cultural identity before 1900. Urbanisation, an influx of immigration and the growth of an industrial working class had challenged the monopoly of the Protestant middle class values that had shaped perceptions of the American character after the Civil War. Diversity, and not cohesion, appeared to characterise the nation.

By the 1930s, this could no longer be said about American culture. The term 'the American Dream' came into popular usage in 1931, and by 1937, the idea of "the American Way" had become so fascinating that *Harper's Magazine* was offering a $1000 prize to the reader essay that best defined its essence.[12] In his 2006 book, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argued that the simultaneous consumption of events brought about by the rise of the mass media helps to constitute a sense of nation among people who are otherwise spatially separated.[13] This is a helpful way to understand the connection between the growth of mass media, and the consolidation of national identity that occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century, and is just as applicable to the comic strips featured in the papers as the news items that Anderson focuses on.

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[11] Roger Pen Cuff, 'The American Editorial Cartoon--A Critical Historical Sketch', *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 19 (October 1945), p. 87.

[12] Wendy Wall, Inventing the 'American Way': The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement (Oxford, 2009), p. 15.

[13] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York, 2006).

This chapter focuses on the place of the syndicated newspaper comic strip in this cultural narrative, arguing that the funnies were one of the first – and most powerful – examples of a widely shared national culture in the United States. First, I examine the development of the comic strip as a narrative form, charting its evolution from single panel cartoons like *Hogan's Alley* into multi-panel, sequential strips that could occupy an entire page of a Sunday paper, and documenting the extraordinary growth of the comics industry in its first few years. Noting the various public reactions to the new medium, including the organized attempt by Progressive reformers to eradicate the comic supplement, I consider how the industry changed and evolved in its first two decades, and the impact of national syndication on the types of comics that were produced. The extensive reach of the strips was made possible through the process of national syndication, and the strips very quickly gained considerable cultural salience. However, the syndication process also impacted the production dynamics of the comics, limiting the artistic freedom of the artists that created them. As the genre gained a foothold in the American cultural scene, strips featuring 'mainstream' American life became more popular. This reflected both the desire by syndicates to portray topics that would appeal to the largest possible audience – and avoid alienating potential reader groups – and also the readers' increasing appetite for social satire that focused on the workings of everyday American life.

Second, I look in detail at the part that these humour strips played in the national spread of American mass culture. The only study to consider this subject at length or in detail is Ian Gordon's fascinating 2002 book *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945*.[14] Gordon

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[14] Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945* (Washington, D.C, 1998); Elsa Nystrom's, 'A Rejection of Order, the Development of the Newspaper Comic Strip in America, 1830-1920', attempts to construct a

examines the part played by comic strips in the development of advertising techniques and, in doing so, makes a compelling argument for the significance of the strips as the first example of a nationally shared visual culture. Gordon believes that 'comic strips were representations through which an increasingly commodified society saw and constituted itself'.[15] His study is thus one of 'the commodification of comic art', and his focus is on the way in which the strips were 'mass market products' that contributed significantly to the formation of a culture of consumption.[16] Gordon includes a section entitled 'The National Spread of Comic Strips', in which he provides a partial picture of the process by which comic strips became a national phenomenon. Using microfilm to trace which newspapers included (non-specific) syndicated comics between 1901 and 1913, Gordon then estimates the size of the potential comic strip audience by recording circulation figures for these papers, highlighting the size of the readership even in the comics' early days of syndication. However, his painstaking analysis does not seek to trace which strips were published in which areas, or offer a geographical picture of the distribution.[17] Extending Gordon's analysis in this way enables us to more accurately demonstrate the existence of a shared cultural product (in terms not only of the fact that different towns had access to some comic strips, but to the same ones) as well as consider regional variations in taste and sense of humour. I agree with Gordon's assessment that the syndication of strips 'provided urban and rural readers with a weekly shared experience and brought together diverse national audiences',

clearer picture of the growth of the comics industry, but focuses quite heavily on existing works on the newspaper industry, such as; Alfred McClung Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America* (London, 2000), 1 & 2.

[15] Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945*, p. 6.

[16] Ibid., p. 9.

[17] Ibid., p. 41.

and my research seeks to shed light on both how that process worked, and what it can tell us about how Americans understood their own cultural identity.[18]

In order to build on the foundations set by Gordon, I utilised two digital newspaper archives. The Library of Congress's *Chronicling America* project has digitised select historic newspaper collections from 1690 to 1922. The records are keyword searchable and include approximately 1900 titles published after 1900. These range from dailies published in large cities to small foreign language titles, special interest journals and local ledgers.[19] Additionally, www.newspaperarchive.com is a subscription-based service, claiming to be the largest online historic newspaper database. In order to trace the national distribution of the syndicated strip, I traced the incidence of eleven strips, in all newspapers in these archives, every year from 1900-1935.[20] While this does not provide an exhaustive list of the distribution of all strips, which was likely much greater than this data is able to show, it does enable us to more accurately record the national development of the comics industry in a way that has not previously been possible.

Third, I use an extensive body of archival material and the available secondary literature to build up a picture of how the comic syndicates worked. The account that Gordon gives of syndicate operations - while limited - is still the most detailed that I have found, highlighting the lack of scholarship in this area.[21] Using the personal papers and correspondence of comic artists and

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[18] Ibid., p. 38.
[19] http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85053305/ [accessed 21st July 2016].
[20] The titles are: Abie the Agent, Bringing Up Father, Mutt and Jeff, Happy Hooligan, The Gumps, The Katzenjammer Kids, Gasoline Alley, Home Sweet Home (The Bungle Family) Doings of the Duffs, Polly and Her Pals, Tillie the Toiler. There are, of course, issues with this approach – namely that it relies on a relatively small sample of US newspapers. We can, therefore, only make firm conclusions based on where the strips did appear, as omissions may simply be due to issues with keyword searching, or limitations with the archive.
[21] Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945*.

syndicate employees as well as articles from newspapers, magazines and the trade press, I have

been able to create a fairly detailed account of the way that comic artists, syndicate

representatives, newspaper editors and the public interacted, and how the industry changed over

the period 1900-1935 and beyond. This process is part of the wider story of professionalization,

regulation and standardization that structures our understanding of the Progressive era. The result

was a carefully honed cultural product that was mass-produced and mass-marketed to a reader

base that – given most experts estimate it as being around 75-80% of daily newspaper readers by

the 1940s – represented a mass audience.[22]

Experimentation: the birth of the funny paper (1892-1912)

Introduction: from editorial cartoon to comic strip

While cartoons were published in newspapers during the nineteenth century, they were very

different to the comic strips that would come to dominate the industry in the twentieth century.

Editorial or political cartoons had been prominent in the press for most of the century. These

'opinion cartoons' were not always funny, with their main intention being to use a combination

of text and a single image to communicate attitudes and opinions, rather than convey humour.[23]

The cartoons did not have recurring characters or tell a story, but satirised well-known

individuals or advanced a position on recent events, often elections or political scandals.

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[22] Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center: Roy Crane Papers, Box 11, Folder 4, 'Draft of Speech', undated. It should be noted that it is not possible to ascertain whether this mass audience included the approximately 10 percent of the population that was black in the years of the study.
[23] Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center: Roy Crane Papers, Box 11, Folder 4, 'Draft of Speech', undated..

Cartoonists covered weighty issues like immigration, corruption, monetary policy, religion, tariffs, poverty, labor and race relations, and often depicted threats to society.[24] Their primary audience was the urban middle classes, and, until around 1900, nearly all political cartoons appeared in news, general interest or satirical magazines published in New York. Very few large circulation daily papers employed political cartoonists before the turn of the century.[25] Until around 1885, weekly journals like *Harper's Weekly* dominated the field, with cartoonists like Thomas Nast and Bernhard Gillam exerting considerable influence on political events via their 'artistic, witty, and pungently satirical' drawings.[26] After 1885, technological innovations like the photoengraving process enabled cartoons to be published every day, and daily newspapers like *The New York World* became the leading medium for the publication of cartoons.[27]

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[24] Tom Culbertson, 'The Golden Age of American Political Cartoons', *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 7 (July 2008), p. 291.
[25] Ibid., p. 278.
[26] Roger Pen Cuff, 'The American Editorial Cartoon--A Critical Historical Sketch', *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 19 (October 1945), p. 90.
[27] Culbertson, 'The Golden Age of American Political Cartoons', p. 279; Pen Cuff, 'The American Editorial Cartoon--A Critical Historical Sketch', pp. 91–92.
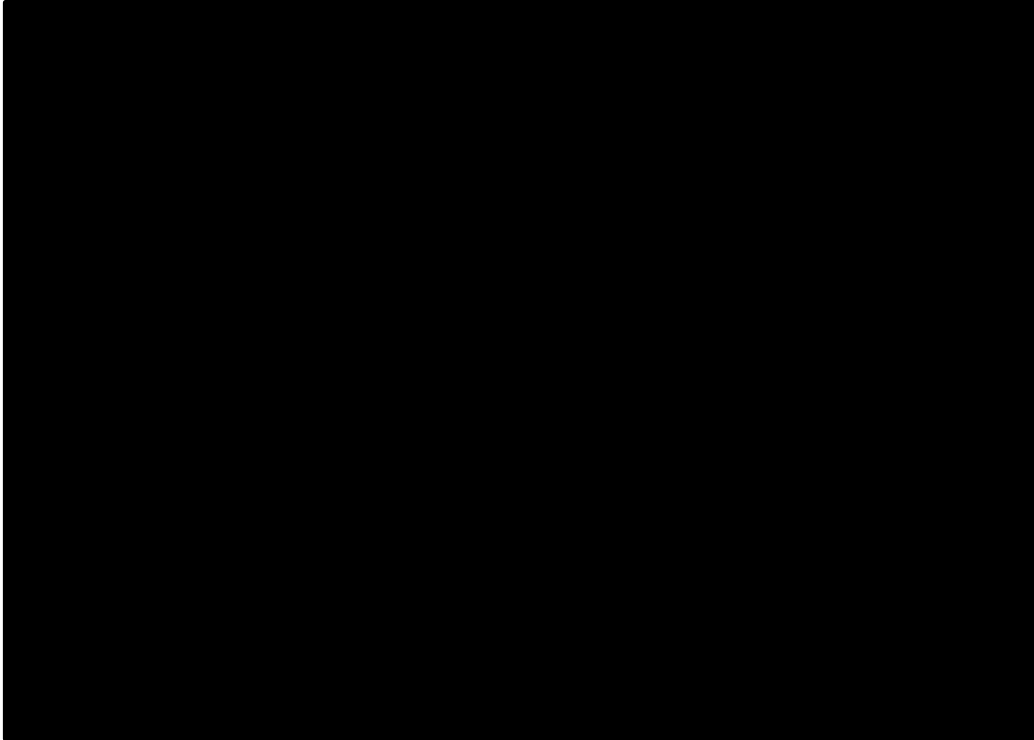
Figure 1 : Thomas Nast, 'Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner', *Harper's Weekly* (22 November 1869).

Thomas Nast's 1869 cartoon entitled 'Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner' typifies the style and

scope of late nineteenth-century political cartoons. The cartoon celebrates America's open

immigration policy ('Come One Come All') and shows support of the recently passed (but

widely contested) 15th Amendment, which prohibited the federal and state governments from

denying a citizen the right to vote based on that citizen's 'race, color, or previous condition of

servitude'.[28] A number of details indicate Nast's stance on the issue. Alongside the text within

and inside beneath the image, the references to Castle Garden (America's first immigration

centre, located in Manhattan) and the inclusion of portraits of Abraham Lincoln, George

Washington and Ulysses S. Grant paint a positive picture of the Amendment and making explicit

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[28] 'http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_amendments_11-27.html' [accessed 6th August 2019].

its patriotic intent. The people sitting at the table are clearly Americans of varying ethnic

backgrounds – there are guests with noticeable Indian, Irish, Chinese and Jewish characteristics,

as well as a black man and, interestingly, several women. Typical of its genre, the cartoon is

presented in one panel, is not explicitly humorous, and makes a clear and unambiguous political

point. Cartoons of this type continued to predominate for much of the rest of the century.

The Little Bears and the Yellow Kid - a new genre of comic

The adaptation of the cartoon form into the new style of comic strip that would soon dominate

Sunday supplements across the nation began with the often-forgotten *The Little Bears,* a cartoon

drawn by Jimmy Swinnerton for the *San Francisco Examiner* as early as 1892. Originally used

as an accompaniment for the local weather forecast, the single-panel strip became very popular

with readers, evolving within a few months to include children as well as bears, and renamed

Little Bears and Tykes.[29] The strip lacked the storytelling element that characterized the later

established strips– its single panel provided a snapshot scene that was reminiscent of an

illustration that would accompany a text (as it did, initially, with the forecast). However, while

lacking the in-episode motion and continuity of later comics, it did include early experimentation

with two important elements of the comic genre: recurring characters (if the bears can be counted

as such) and speech bubbles. Swinnerton continued to create *Little Bears and Tykes* for the

Examiner until he was poached by William Randolph Hearst in 1896. At Hearst's request, the

bears became tigers, and then one tiger in particular – the philandering Mr. Jack – emerged as a

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[29] Ivy Press, *#810 HCA New York Comic and Comic Art* (2004).

key personality in 1904 and became the titular character in the strip, which would run in Hearst's papers until 1935.
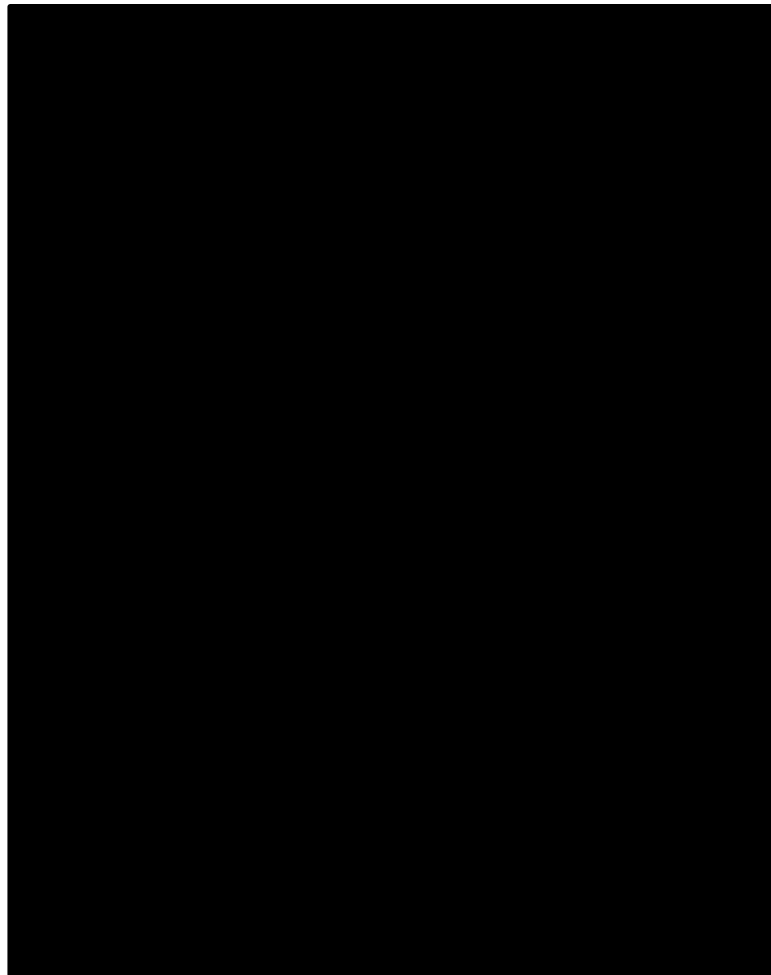
Figure 2: Jimmy Swinnerton's *Little Bears*, 1892

The other strip to act as a precursor to the funny papers, which has been given considerably greater attention by historians was Richard Outcault's *Hogan's Alley*, first published in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* in 1895. Capitalizing on Progressive-era interest in the slums, the strip was set in a typical street in an overcrowded urban ethnic community in New York, filled with half dressed, often dirty people of all shapes, sizes and colours. In 1896, Outcault introduced the character of Mickey Dugan – more commonly known as the Yellow Kid – into

the cast of characters. This proved a turning point for the strip, as well as the genre, as it set the precedent for the use of recurring characters with their own personalities, a distinct break from the use of stereotypes and thematic tropes in political cartoons.

Hogan's Alley/The Yellow Kid was also the first to make sustained use of dialogue in cartoon strips. Prior to the character's introduction the strips relied upon the captions at the bottom of the picture to relay any message, the same method used in editorial cartoons (see Figure 3). First through The Kid's nightgown, and then occasionally with speech bubbles, Outcault introduced a form of dialogue to cartoons (see Figure 4). So successful was Outcault's cartoon in helping to increase circulation figures that in October 1896 he took up an offer to move across to William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* and draw the strip there. His replacement at the *World,* George Luks, continued to draw his own version of the strip while Pulitzer and Hearst battled over the rights to the Yellow Kid. When a judge ruled that neither paper owned the copyrights, both ran their own version of the strip – Luks' in the *World* continued to carry the name 'Hogan's Alley', and Outcault's in the *Journal* was named after its central character.
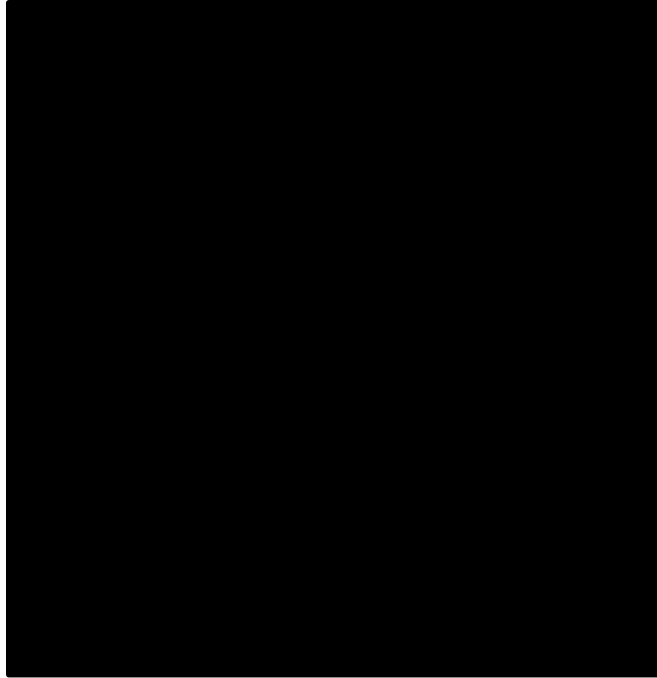
Figure 3: Richard F. Outcault, 'A New Restaurant in Casey's Alley', *New York World* (18 May 1895)

Stylistically the two versions of the cartoon were very similar, with Luks continuing the format that Outcault had popularized, which was in many ways similar to that used by political cartoonists like Nast in Figure 2. The 'strip' was actually a single panel illustration, which was often a full page. It usually had a headline caption, with text then incorporated into the illustration through speech bubbles and contextual matter like posters and signs, as well as on Mickey Dugan's nightgown. In this way, the strip provided a snapshot of a scene, or made a statement on a single topic, rather than narrating a story – something that characterized later comic strips. Despite the introduction of dialogue, there was little interaction between the characters in the strips, and no sense of time or movement. While the same faces appeared week in and week out, they did not develop into proper characters with personalities, storylines or relationships with one another. There were no real overarching storylines, with each edition offering a snapshot of a discrete topic – often something from the news, such as a visiting

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statesman, or election day (see figure 4). The strips often still included issues from national politics, and both Outcault and Luks regularly used the strip to commentate on Progressive-era concerns like immigration, elections and race relations. The most significant difference was the use of humour to poke fun at individuals and ideas, rather than taking an unambiguous ideological stance on an issue.[30] Unlike Thomas Nast, who tended to locate cartoons in significant civic or political settings, Outcault (and Luks) used social settings as a place to think through political events. However, although much of the humour was derived from social rather than political scenarios (for example the Hogan's Alley Kids visiting a beach or Coney Island, or catching a dog catcher), neither Outcault nor Luks quite made the transition into constructing jokes or gags out of everyday social interactions, something that would characterize the genre of the funny paper in years to come.

Much like their political predecessors, both Outcault and Luks also created strips that fitted the specific editorial profile of the newspaper they appeared in. Pulitzer's vision of the *New York World* was a cheap, bright journal aimed at the working classes that was 'truly democratic'.[31] His paper, in the words of Stanley Kobre, was an 'aggressive champion of those who had no voice to plead their cause'.[32] From the time he took it over in 1883, Pulitzer engaged with contemporary concerns over the state of urban slums. He featured exposés of the sordid conditions of New York's tenement houses and championed the cause of European immigrants.[33] This ethos is

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[30] See, for example, 'The War Scare in Hogan's Alley', *New York World,* 15 March 1896; 'Hogan's Alley Preparing for the Convention', *New York World,* 17 May 1896; 'A Hot Political Convention in Hogan's Alley', *New York World,* 12 July 1896.
[31] Kobre, *The Yellow Press, and Gilded Age Journalism*, pp. 46–47.
[32] Ibid., p. 54.
[33] 'About the Evening World. (New York, N.Y.) 1887-1931', (13 January 2015).

reflected in the Hogan's Alley strips drawn for the paper by both Outcault and Luks. A superficial reading of the strips might lead one to assume that they are anti-immigrant, decrying the squalor of the slums and criticizing their inhabitants. However, closer inspection reveals a more complex picture. While Hogan's Alley is undoubtedly an ethnic tenement community with immigrant characters (the predominant names in the strip suggest an Irish origin) mixing happily with African-Americans, the strips very rarely contain explicit ethnic humour, or openly mock the non-white or immigrant characters.

Figure 4: George B. Luks, 'President-Elect McKinley Visits Hogan's Alley', *New York World* (29 November 1897)

In fact, the jokes contained within the strips are more often at the expense of political figures or policies than of the strips' characters. In Outcault's 'Hogan's Alley Preparing for the Convention' (1896), the Hogan's alley gang process through the streets in the direction of St Louis with signs proclaiming various messages. One echoes the paper's anti-Bryan stance by

mocking the Free Silver campaign, suggesting that instead a free lunch should be offered.[34]

Another banner reinforces the paper's longstanding anti-Republican stance, saying: 'dis is de

republican moveable platform – de planks is all loose and reversible and can be removed to suit

de winner.'[35] After Outcault's departure from the *World* in October 1896, his replacement

George Luks actually increased the amount of political content in the strip, devoting several

editions of *Hogan's Alley* to the presidential election of 1896, and the New York mayoral

election the following year. In the aftermath of McKinley's victory, Luks has him visiting

Hogan's Alley (see figure. 4, above), making a political alliance with the Yellow Kid, who is

helping him decide who to have in his cabinet.

In 1897 Luks' version of the central characters move further into the political realm, exploring

ideas of political corruption, with the Yellow Kid himself standing for Mayor of New York only

to be beaten by his nephews, babies Alex and George. The boys get the nomination for Mayor

jointly, despite George declaring himself a Democrat and Alex a Republican – making a

mockery of party political games. The Kid's response is that he will form another party and get

the nomination that way, while the nephews privately joke that they will appoint their Uncle

Mayor so that they can go and swim at Coney Island.[36] By contrast, at the much less politically

motivated *New York Journal,* Outcault was drawing Yellow Kid strips that depicted amusing

social scenes, rarely engaging with the political events of the day. His coverage of the mayoral

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[34] Although the *New York World* – and Pulitzer himself - had long been a staunch supporter of the Democratic Party, the Free Silver issue caused his two papers to split; the *World* aligned with North-Eastern interests in opposing Free Silver, whereas the *St Louis Dispatch* aligned itself with Bryan on the issue.

[35] Richard F. Outcault, 'Hogan's Alley Prepare for the Convention', *New York World,* 17 May 1896.

[36] George Luks, 'New York's most popular citizen, the Sunday World's Yellow Kid, how would he do for Mayor?', *New York World,* 3 October 1897; George Luks, 'A political revolt – the little nippers defeat the Yellow Kid and get the nomination for Mayor of New York', *New York World,* 17 October 1897.

election involved the characters having a bonfire party, with the humour derived from gags that played on words. For instance, one sign read: 'If you want to kindle the fire of love go to Mr McSweeney's Matrimonial Agency – he makes the matches, see'. Another invited the rich to bring money that they can burn.[37] This shift away from overt political commentary signifies another important point in the transition of the genre from political cartoons towards the funny papers, in which humour was derived from everyday material that would appeal to a much wider audience.

Although it was stylistically similar to political cartoons in many ways, the invention of the Yellow Kid character was a turning point, creating a new role for comical cartoons as circulation builders. The introduction of the strip to the *New York Journal* was one of the central elements of Hearst's campaign to boost sales of the paper, which amounted to a mere 77,000 a day when he bought it in 1895, compared to the 800,000 boasted by Pulitzer's *New York World*. By 1897, after a series of improvements that included the introduction of the *Yellow Kid,* the paper was selling 960,000 copies a day and was Pulitzer's primary competition.[38] It was also the first comic to be distributed beyond its flagship paper, with Pulitzer first syndicating Luks' version of the strip to a few papers in 1897, a move which sparked the growth of an entire industry.[39] In its stylistic innovations, role in boosting sales and application to the process of syndication, the *Yellow Kid,* while it did not bear all the hallmarks of the later funny papers, was the predecessor and inspiration for those that would follow.

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[37] Richard F. Outcault, 'The Crowd gets up an election bonfire and the Yellow Kid plays Nero', *New York Journal,* 7 November 1897.

[38] Christopher Ogden, *Legacy: A Biography of Moses and Walter Annenberg* (New York, 2009), p. 2.

[39] Kobre, *The Yellow Press, and Gilded Age Journalism*, p. 306.

The triumph of the new medium: The Katzenjammer Kids

The first true example of the funny paper genre was Rudolph Dirks' *The Katzenjammer Kids*, first published in 1897 in Hearst's *New York Journal.* Dirks built on the developments made by Outcault but pushed the boundaries further, firmly establishing the new style of comic strips. *The Katzenjammer Kids* had a host of regular characters: a set of mischievous twins, Hans and Fritz, their mother ("Mama") and "Der Captain", a retired sea commander and a sort of surrogate father to the boys. The strip advanced on the stylistic innovations made by Outcault and Luks in several important ways, and represented a definitive shift in narrative style. First, unlike *The Yellow Kid,* which depicted a snapshot of a scene in a single panel, *The Katzenjammer Kids* was printed across several panels, demonstrating the passage of time, and allowing for forward motion within one story. Dirks also employed the use of speech balloons with more consistency than Outcault, with the characters interacting in conversation with each other. All of these features contributed to and enabled the shift in focus of the strip. *The Katzenjammer Kids* was the first real "gag" strip, with a clear beginning, middle and end, and humour derived from the interaction between the characters, and their everyday lives. Usually the joke was "on" one of the main characters. While both strips featured children, *The Katzenjammer Kids* – or '*Katzies'* as it was sometimes called – appealed to parents and children alike.
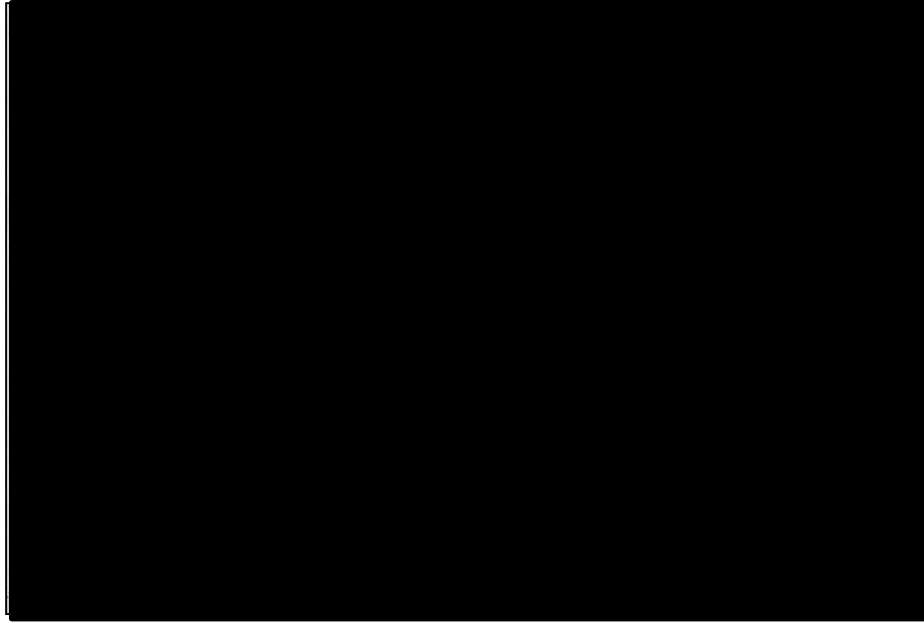
Figure 5: 'Those Naughty, Naughty Katzenjammer Kids'*, Times Dispatch,* (15 February 1903)

Much like *The Yellow Kid*, *The Katzenjammer Kids* also found itself in the centre of the

competition between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, with the result – again –

being the simultaneous existence of two versions of the same strip. The original strip was drawn

by Dirks for Hearst's *New York Journal.* Indeed, Hearst himself is usually credited with coming

up with the idea for the strip, which was loosely based on German comic picture books *Bilder*

Bucher, which he read and collected by the hundreds as a child.[40] Dirks drew the strip for Hearst

for 15 years, but its popularity was such that when he wanted to take a leave of absence to travel

in 1912, Hearst was unwilling to suspend publication of one of his most valuable features. As a

result, he gave the job to Harold K. Knerr who continued to draw the strip even after Dirks

returned, as Hearst refused to give it back.[41] When the case went to court, the judge followed the

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[40] Ben H. Procter, *William Randolph Hearst: The Early Years, 1863-1910* (New York, 1998), p. 21.
[41] http://www.toonopedia.com/katzen.htm [accessed 4 February 2019].

precedent set in the case of *The Yellow Kid,* allowing Hearst to keep the original strip, but giving

Dirks permission to draw his own version – under a different title – in a rival paper. Dirks joined

Pulitzer's newspaper group in 1914 and created *Hans und Fritz* – later renamed *The Captain and*

the Kids – which continued its run for over 50 years.[42]

A genre established: the early days of syndication

By 1907, the concept of the newspaper comic supplement was well established, with the majority

of large newspapers carrying at least one Sunday strip.[43] Accounts of the comic industry in the

period have, understandably, tended to focus on the strips that were either creatively or

graphically significant (such as Windsor McKay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, 1905-1911) or

became big successes through the 1910s and 1920s, like Bud Fisher's *Mutt and Jeff* (1907-1983).

Focusing on larger strips that are considered to have had a significant popular impact is certainly

the approach that best enables historians to track the development and influence of the comic

genre, as well as analyse the content of the most widely-accessed strips. However, perhaps as a

result of the focus on these 'big-hitters', the image we have of the early comic market is one

dominated by a few notorious characters that would later find form in merchandised goods,

Broadways revues and advertisements. In fact, in the early years in particular, these comics

existed in amongst a sea of others. As newspaper editors realized the instant popular appeal of

the comics, many commissioned their own funny pages, or bought strips from one of the small

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[42] Goulart, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, p. 100.
[43] See for example 'The Evolution of the Comic Picture and the Comic Artist', *San Francisco Daily Call* (12 November 1905), in which the editor posited that the American public would refuse to subscribe to a Sunday paper that did not include a comic supplement of some kind.

syndicate organizations that had begun to spring up across the United States from the earliest appearances of the strips.

It has previously been difficult to measure the scale of the comic industry in its early years, as references to comics other than those with considerable notoriety have been fairly limited. For some years, Ron Goulart's *The Encyclopedia of American Comics* (1990) was the most thorough attempt to document the breadth of the market, and includes 'entries on every major American comic strip and comic strip artist, plus a good many minor ones'.[44] The book is rich in detail about the comics it features, but has limits: even some fairly major strips, like Walter Allman's *Doings of the Duffs*, are missing. This is a problem noted by comic expert Allan Holtz, who wrote:

> I discovered that my favourite cartoonists often had more extensive resumes than previously known, and work that was most certainly worth finding. But what I also found along the way was that these well-known cartoonists were just the tip of the iceberg. For every newly found feature by a McManus or Herriman, there were dozens of forgotten features by obscure cartoonists. Some were patently awful, of course, and perhaps not worth remembering. But I discovered countless others that are delightful works that deserve their due, whether for their great art, great storytelling, or contribution to social history.[45]

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[44] Goulart, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Comics* p. v.
[45] Allan Holtz, *American newspaper comics: an encyclopedic reference guide* (Ann Arbor, 2012), p. 2.

Seeking to redress the balance, in 2012 Holtz, who is a dedicated comic art historian and the author of the online cartoon blog 'A Stripper's Guide,' published the most detailed and comprehensive comic reference guide to date. The book, which runs to 624 pages, was based on two decades of archival research. In it, Holtz has indexed every comic strip he has found evidence of to date, along with information about their creators, start and end dates and syndicates/distributors. The index contains a total of 7012 entries. In order to uncover more details about the development of the early comic industry, I analysed all entries beginning with 'A' – a total of 395 strips.[46]

Holtz's database demonstrates the enormous growth, and experimental nature, of the comics industry in its early years. Of the total of 395 strips in the 'A' sample, 266 – or 67% – were started between 1897 and 1935. Scaled up based on the entire database of 7012 comics, this would suggest that a staggering 4700 strips in total were introduced in the period of this study. Of these 266 'A' strips introduced in the period between 1897 and 1935, 32% began in the first 10 years. Scaling the proportions up to the entire database again suggests that by December 1906, over 1500 different humour comics, created by hundreds of artists and distributed by a range of organisations, had been published in various newspapers across the United States. The peak period for new entries to the market was 1901 – 1913, in which an average of 13 new 'A' strips (or a scaled up figure of 230 strips in total) appeared each year. After 1913, as national syndication became more organised, and the market was dominated by a few big players, the

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[46] By contrast, Goulart's *Encyclopedia* contains information on 26 comics beginning with the letter 'A'.

number of comics introduced each year more than halved, with an average of six new 'A' strips (or 30 strips overall) hitting the market each year.

The vast majority of the earliest strips have long been forgotten, neither mentioned in survey histories of the genre nor warranting Wikipedia entries. No doubt the main reason for this was the fact that many, if not most, of these early strips lasted mere months. Over half of the 266 'A' strips printed between 1897 and 1935 ended less than a year after they began, with some lasting only a couple of weeks. This trend was highest in the earliest strips: 63% of strips that began before 1908 folded in the year they began, and a further 23% lasted only into the next calendar year. Papers and syndicates were clearly willing to try out new ideas and comic artists to see if their creations would catch on, and proved unafraid to cancel them and replace them with something else if they were not successful. This early group of strips covered a wide range of topics, with different artists clearly 'borrowing' ideas from each other. By 1907, there had been an *Absent-Minded Abner*, *Absent-Minded Augie*, *Absent-Minded Jones*, *Absent-Minded Man* and *Absent-Minded Mr. Dingle*, as well as 24 different '*Adventures of…*' titles, ranging from the *Adventures of a Japanese Doll* to those of the Stranded Dime Museum Freaks. Both of these titles lasted less than 12 months.
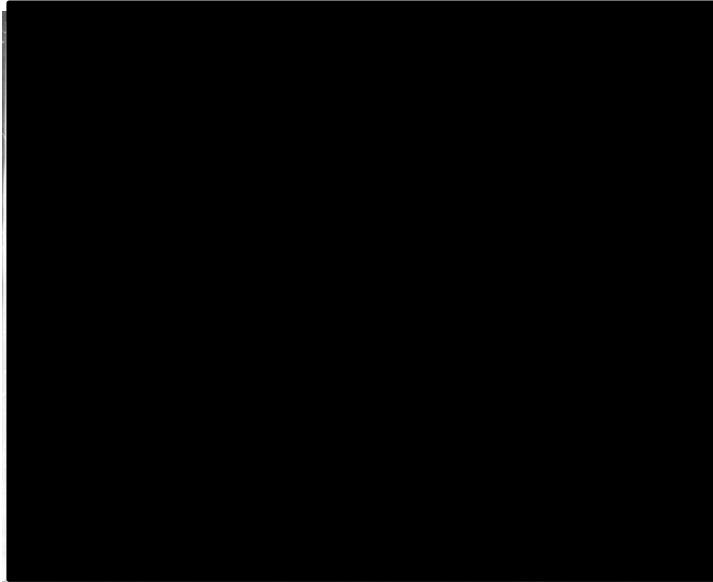
Figure 6: 'The Adventures of the Stranded Dime Museum Freaks', *Salt Lake Herald*, 23 March 1902.

Several strips that would prove to be longstanding national hits began in this era. *Happy Hooligan*, which is one of the comics traced in this study, was an early entrant to the newspaper comic supplement, first appearing in 1900 in several of Hearst's newspapers. Happy was a bumbling, tramp-like character, whose hapless existence usually led him into trouble. While he wore the clothing of (and indeed associated with) the aristocracy, his clothes were ragged and his manners worse, as his creator Frederick Burr Opper derived much humour from physical comedy in which characters ended up covered in soup, in a brawl or in an accident. *Happy Hooligan* immediately became popular with readers, and would be one of Hearst's flagship strips for decades to come.
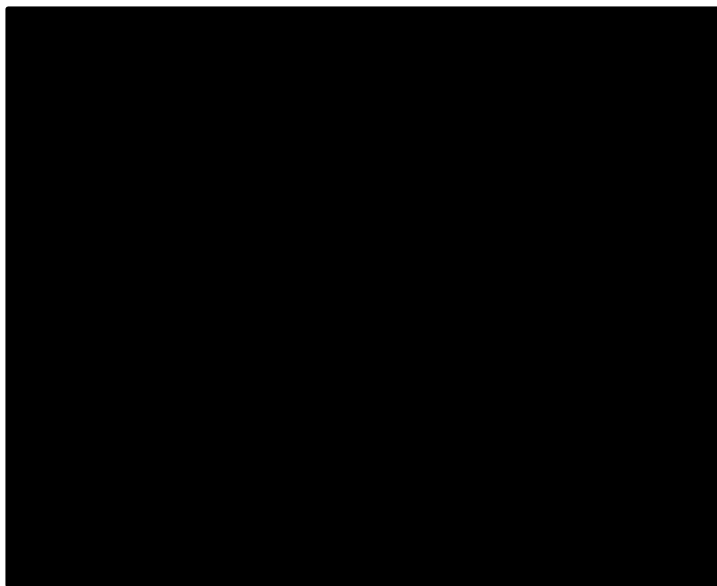
Figure 7: In this highly racialised strip, Happy Hooligan receives a beating. *Salt Lake Herald*, 8 April 1906.

Though many of the early comics featured mischievous children, clownish adults and animals, some did address more adult topics without descending into slapstick, demonstrating that the assessment of the early strips as being solely children's entertainment is too simplistic. Windsor McKay's seemingly child-focused *Little Sammy Sneeze*, which he created for the *New York Herald* from 1904 to 1906, used humour to draw attention to the pervasive nature of consumerism.[47] A. D. Condo's *Everett True* (1905-1927) was loosely based on a notorious music critic, and featured the diatribes of grumpy old man who enjoyed complaining about the wrongs done to him.[48] *Alphonse and Gaston*, drawn by Frederick Burr Opper and appearing sporadically in Hearst papers for around a decade from 1901, derived humour from the excessive politeness

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[47] See Katherine Roeder, *Wide Awake in Slumberland: Fantasy, Mass Culture, and Modernism in the Art of Winsor McCay* (Oxford, Mississippi, 2014).
[48] *American Comic Strips Before 1918*, (undated), p. 37.

of two French waiters. Their antics inspired the enduring catchphrase 'After you, my dear Alphonse', which was used for many decades in situations when one person dared another to do something dangerous.[49] And, lastly, William Koerner's *Hugo Hercules* featured the comic page's first superhero, who wandered the streets helping civilians from 1902 to 1903.[50]

Examinations of the development of the comic genre often attribute Sidney Smith's much later strip, *The Gumps*, with being the first developed example of a continuity strip, with the storyline following the love affair between rich Uncle Bim and the money-hungry Widow Zander spanning several months in 1921.[51] An article on the subject by Larry Harris, written in 1945, reveals that the success of these storylines 'made the strip so popular people were snatching it off circulation truck drivers', causing many other comic artists to hire continuity writers that specialized in storylines.[52] Certainly, Smith's storylines in this later period reflected a degree of sophistication that was absent from earlier strips. However, assessments of the early comics as simply 'gag strips' or 'illustrated jokes' ignore the early attempts by artists like Opper to include serialized drama, something which would become central to the ability of the comics to encourage newspaper readership. In *Happy Hooligan*, for example, Happy's disastrous courtship with Suzanne continues from 1909 to 1916, and while it lacks the day-to-day, cliffhanger soap opera quality of some of the later strips, it should certainly be recognized as an example of early continuity in the comics. Even before Happy began wooing Suzanne, Opper's story arcs were, in

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[49] Ibid., p. 15.
[50] Ibid., p. 20.
[51] John Arthur Garraty and Mark Christopher Carnes, *American National Biography* (Oxford, 1999), p. 278; Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History* (Oxford, Mississippi, 1994), p. 62; Elizabeth McLeod, *The Original Amos 'n' Andy: Freeman Gosden, Charles Correll and the 1928-1943 Radio Serial* (North Carolina, 2015), p. 25; Priscilla Wald, Michael A. Elliott, and Jonathan Arac, *The American Novel 1870-1940* (2014), p. 363.
[52] Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: Larry Harris Collection, 18/7 Syndicate Advertising Information, Allen Saunders, 'The Comics.... are a serious business', August 1945.

a fairly rudimentary way, spanning several weeks. In 1905, Happy's visit to England and desire to meet the King is used as an overarching narrative thread and structures a group of several strips appearing over a period of eight months.[53]

In this early period, comics were produced and distributed in several ways. Some comic artists were the direct employees of a newspaper (and might work across departments, also drawing editorial cartoons or sports sketches for example) producing one or many strips for that papers as part of their employment.[54] It was not unheard of for an artist to produce several comics for different papers – Hy Gage, for example, created at least 13 strips between 1901 and 1907, which appeared in a number of newspapers, some lasting only a few months.[55] However, the market was dominated in the early years by journalistic pioneer William Randolph Hearst, who initially distributed comic strips across his newspaper chain and then quickly started selling them to non-Hearst papers too. By 1908, Hearst's representatives claimed that his Sunday comics were appearing in more than 80 newspapers across 50 cities (compared to the 200 daily newspapers that bought news content from Hearst in the same period).[56] The *New York Herald* operated on a similar basis, distributing key titles by Richard Outcault before he moved over to join Hearst (*Buster Brown*) and Windsor McKay (*Sammy Sneeze, Little Nemo in Slumberland*). *The Chicago Tribune* was another early syndicator of comics, selling *The Kin-der-Kids* and *Wee Willie Winkie's World* long before the formation of *The Chicago Tribune Syndicate* in 1918. McClures,

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[53] 'Happy Hooligan', various, 8 January 1905 – 8 November 1905.
[54] Caniff, 'Production and Distribution', p. 129.
[55] These were: Breeches Boys, Mr Billyuns, Bessie Busybody, Strenuous White House Fun by the Roosevelt Kids, Generous George, Little Billy Penn and His Doggy Schuylkill, Timothy Hay, Mr. Grouch and Mrs Rummage.
[56] M. Keith Booker, *Comics through Time: A History of Icons, Idols, and Ideas [4 volumes]: A History of Icons, Idols, and Ideas* (Santa Barbara, 2014), p. 218.

an existing syndicate that had distributed fiction titles for newspaper syndication since around 1893, began including comic content in its offering in 1901, though its real impact in the comics business began much later, when it procured the Wheeler Syndicate and all of its comics.[57] June 1902 saw the birth of the Newspaper Enterprise Association (run by Scripps) which supplied a complete 'budget' of features to the afternoon sheets in the three Scripps chains, including cartoons, pictures, fashion articles for women, illustrated sports stories, human interest yarns and editorial material.[58]

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[57] Emery, Emery, and Roberts, *The Press and America*, p. 223; Johanningsmeier, *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace*.

[58] Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America*, p. 589.
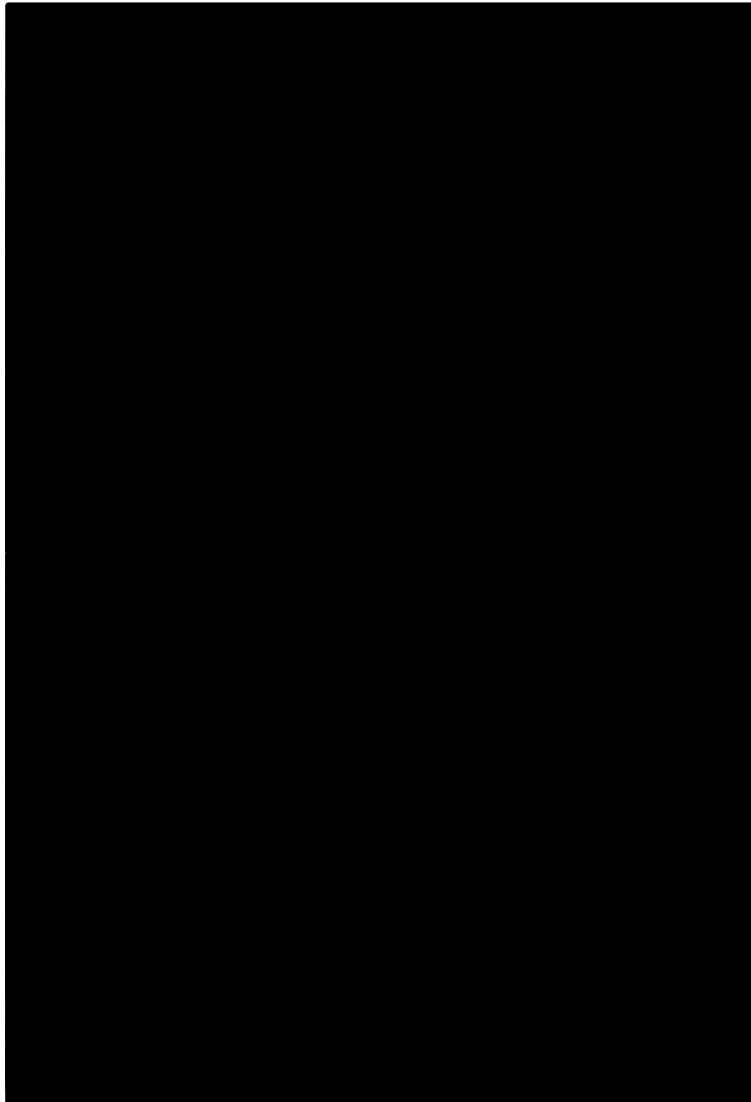
Figure 8: Full page advertisement for the Sunday comic supplement in the *Star Tribune*, 2 April 1905.

Within a decade of its first appearance, and a decade earlier than the mass boom in syndication usually pointed to by histories of the medium, the newspaper comic strip had firmly established itself as an integral element of the American cultural landscape, so that as one journalist put it: 'There was a time when there was no comic supplement… none of the host of people whose faces are more familiar to us than our next door neighbors', whose names are oftener on our tongues than those of the heroes in the Hall of Fame. There was such a time and we have

forgotten it already, although it was only ten years ago'.[59] Papers ran full page adverts (see figure 8 above) reminding their readers of the weekend's line-up, with comic strips acting as a significant draw to readers young and old. The signs of their cultural impact were already evident, with the first spin-offs into consumer products and stage shows appearing across the country.[60] The comic strip had, despite seeming to appear out of nowhere, quickly emerged as an institution.

The anti-comics movement, 1907-1912

Somewhat ironically, one of the most obvious indicators of the strips' impact was the upsurge in hostility towards them among those who believed the role of popular culture was to uplift rather than amuse. Along with the sensationalized news stories and 'tawdry' fiction material that often accompanied them in the tabloid press, the funny papers aroused the wrath of reformers, who claimed that such features standardised both the newspaper and the American mind, stunted children's and adults' sense of humor, and pandered to the tastes of the moronic and low brow.[61] These reformers feared that the comics undermined their vision of a form American cultural consolidation centred round high art, moral messages and obedience to authority.

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[59] 'Personality of Dick Outcault, Prince of Artists Picturing the Humorous Side of Life', *El Paso Times* (19 November 1905).
[60] This topic is covered at length in Chapter 4, which examines the long and short term cultural impact of the comics. See also Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945* in particular Chapter 2 'Comic Strips, National Culture and Marketing' (pp. 37-58).
[61] Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America*, p. 576.

This moral panic fuelled the first major campaign against the comic supplement, which emerged in around 1904, gained pace in 1907 and lasted until 1912. In December 1904, both the *St. Paul Globe* and *Minnesota Journal* reported on a recent meeting of the Minnesota Educational Association, where the 'damaging impact' of the comic supplement was discussed.[62] The article in the *St. Paul Globe* referenced the widespread and increasing influence of the comics in the Sunday papers on the nation's children, whose grammar, tastes and morals were being negatively impacted by strips like the *Katzenjammer Kids* 'and other eccentrics'.[63] Numerous similar articles followed over the next few years, complaining of children being turned to bad manners, mischief and even criminality by their favourite cartoons. One damning indictment of the strips declared: 'The influence of the comic supplements, lacking in humor as they are, has been vicious in the extreme. If the truth could be ascertained, they have sent more boys to the State correctional institutions than any other single agency that could be named.'[64] In 1906, much to the amusement of several commentators, the trustees of Oakland Free Library went so far as to ban the comic supplement of the local paper from their reading rooms, in an attempt to put an end to patrons of the library being disturbed by children laughing at the pictures.[65]

Organised efforts to put an end to the Sunday supplement began at some point in 1907, when the International Kindergarten Union decided to take a definite stand against the comics, calling on parents to ban the Sunday papers from their homes.[66] The Union 'declared war' against the strips, deeming them to be 'of bad morals and bad art'. *The Brownsville Herald* warned that they

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[62] 'Untitled article', *Minnesota Journal* (29 December 1904).
[63] 'State Educators Begin Convention', *St Paul Globe* (29 December 1904).
[64] 'Untitled Article', *Washington Herald* (19 January 1907).
[65] 'Picture is Object Lesson to Gruff Board', *San Francisco Examiner* (18 February 1906).
[66] Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America*, p. 402.

inculcated 'bad morals and inspire children to rebel against their parents'; they represented a 'low type of art' and they were an unnecessary addition to the Sunday paper.[67] By 1910, at least three other organisations had joined the crusade. The Women's Christian Temperance Union, The League of American Pen Women and the Twentieth Century Club of Washington were all 'earnestly labouring to do away with the so-called "comic" supplement to the Sunday Papers'.[68] In a recent PhD thesis on the topic, Ralph Suiter attaches great importance to his discovery of an article published in the *Women's Home Companion* in May 1907 (the same month as the *Brownsville Herald* article quoted above) arguing that it was the first piece to advocate for a campaign against the comic supplement, rather than just criticising its shortcomings.[69] He believes that the fact that this call to action emerged from this specific publication means the campaign should be viewed in the specific context of Progressive-era maternalism.[70]

Whether or not the *Women's Home Companion* piece was the first to explicitly seek action against the comics, Suiter's emphasis on the significance of gender politics is salient. While men and women alike wrote articles condemning the influence of prank strips, the language used and the specific concerns raised resonated as part of a wider discourse on the need to protect children, something that was of particular concern to female reform groups. Nancy Dye has argued that as the new industrial order strengthened the boundaries of separate spheres in the early twentieth century, the wellbeing of households and the safety of children seemed

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[67] 'Assail Funny Page', *Brownsville Herald* (11 May 1907).
[68] 'The Comic Supplement to Sunday Papers', *San Juan Islander* (3 June 1910).
[69] Ralph Suiter, ''Vulgarizing American Children': Navigating Respectability and Commercial Appeal in Early Newspaper Comics' (George Mason University, 2016), p. 69.
[70] Suiter's research is predicated on the argument that the very early comics supplements were intended to make the yellow journals more palatable to a middle-class audience; an endeavour that was quickly revealed to be fruitless as in fact, the comics became a metonym for the very idea of the yellow press from around 1897.

increasingly out of individual women's control, which caused considerable anxiety.[71] The fear that the popularity of comics might corrupt children and even threaten the very fabric of society tapped into growing concerns around the need for 'child saving' and intervention into standards of public morality.

Responses from the industry to the crusade varied, with the secure position of the strips by no means guaranteed. As early as 1906, the *La Crosse Tribune* ran an article explaining that, in response to criticisms from readers that 'the Sunday comic supplement is inferior to the rest of the paper', it would be introducing an entirely new comic feature, created largely by the best comic artists in Germany, the country that had – after all – inspired the American comic industry.[72] The paper had gone to the trouble of making a special trip to Europe to conclude arrangements 'which will mark an epoch in the history of comic journalism in the United States', securing several German artists for exclusive use with the *Tribune*[73]. In 1909, when Richard Outcault (creator of the *Yellow Kid* and *Buster Brown*) was asked if he thought that comics would continue to be a leading feature in newspapers, he said no.[74]

However, the campaign's actual impact on the production and inclusion of strips seems to have been fairly minimal. Based on the analysis of 'A' comics in the Holtz index, the years 1907 to 1912 saw only a slight reduction in terms of new strips introduced to the market – 69 strips were

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[71] Nancy S. Dye, 'Introduction', in Nancy S. Dye and Noralee Frankel, eds., *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era* (Lexington, 1991), p. 3.
[72] No doubt the reference here is to William Busch's 'Max und Moritz' strip, which has been cited as the inspiration for *The Katzenjammer Kids.*
[73] 'Newspaper Comic Supplements', *La Crosse Tribune* (4 May 1906).
[74] Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America*, p. 402.

started, compared to 76 in the period 1901-1906. 73 'A' strips were terminated in the period 1907-1912, suggesting that during this time there may have actually been a net reduction of strips on the market overall. While this seems to point to the influence of the anti-comic campaign, it may in fact have simply been symptomatic of the experimental and temporary character of the genre in its early years. When comparing to 1901-1906 again, the numbers are not vastly different: in the earlier period, 74 strips were ended, compared to the 76 started, meaning an overall gain of only two strips. Given these numbers are based on a sample and not the entire comic market, it would be difficult to use them to make a convincing argument that the anti-comics campaign had a profound impact on the production of the strips themselves.

This period also saw the introduction of the first successful daily strip – *Mutt and Jeff* – in 1907.[75] The almost overnight success of the strip, which was initially produced for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and distributed nationally by Hearst, made its creator Bud Fisher the first real celebrity of the comic world. Its inception changed the nature of the genre and the direction of the industry supporting it as other artists and distributors considered how they too could provide laughs on a daily – instead of weekly – basis, to both adults and children.[76] Defenders of the comic supplement pointed out that the strips were not just entertaining for children but had a devoted adult following too.[77] Furthermore, as an editorial in the *Salt Lake Herald* pointed out,

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[75] While Holtz's index cites George Frink's *The Absent Minded Man* (1901-1910) as an early daily strip, I have been unable to verify this, as I have not located the strip in any newspapers.

[76] Wiley Lee Umphlett, *The Visual Focus of American Media Culture in the Twentieth Century: The Modern Era, 1893-1945* (2004), p. 76.

[77] 'Old Man Grump', *The Richmond Climax* (30 November 1910).

no proof had ever been offered to demonstrate the injurious nature of the strips to adults or children, despite much blustering among intellectuals.[78]
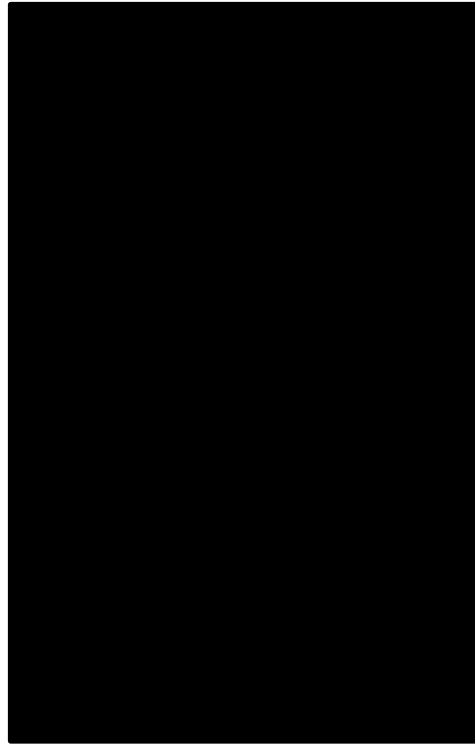
Figure 9: Detail from an early edition of *Mutt and Jeff* in the *El Paso Herald,* 12 July 1910.

Demonstrating some foresight, the same piece in the *Herald* also noted that the fairly recent introduction of the colour press would likely encourage a general improvement in the quality of newspaper comics. Several papers sought to appease critics by changing the strips they published to ones deemed more acceptable. Outcault's *Buster Brown* was one such title. Its principal character was a mischievous child, but one who learned a moral tale at the climax of each strip, rather than simply playing an amusing prank and getting away with it. In 1909 the *Ogden Standard* told readers proudly that it had procured *Buster Brown* 'at a considerably greater

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[78] 'The Comic Supplement', *Salt Lake Herald* (18 November 1908).

expense' because of complaints by parents about the 'demoralising tendency' of previous strips.[79] Only one publication was recorded to have removed its comic supplement altogether. The *Boston Herald* announced in October 1908 that it was removing its comic section, due to its tawdry, vulgar nature. However, as was noted by a (vehemently anti-comics) commentator writing in the *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* that December, the vast majority of papers would retain their comics, despite their own misgivings as to their quality, 'due to the demand of a certain portion of the public that will not purchase a Sunday paper that does not contain it'.[80]

As the years passed, the anti-comics movement gradually shifted focus. Having failed to eradicate the comic section, critics instead sought to make it better, and in 1911, the Kindergarten Union formed the League for the Improvement of the Children's Comic Supplement.[81] This move also had no immediate impact on the genre, and articles and publications bemoaning the vulgarity of the strips and the damage they were doing to the nation's children continued to be published through 1912 and 1913. During the war years, the critique of the comics shifted focus once again, as a general newsprint shortage prompted opponents of the comics, including the War Industries Board, to criticise the 'continued publication of the comic sections' when they could have been using the paper to spread propaganda, or at least print war news.[82] However, due to their enduring popularity and the unwillingness of editors to risk losing readers, the comics survived largely unscathed, particularly in larger newspapers.

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[79] ''Buster Brown' on Saturdays', *Ogden Standard* (7 December 1909).
[80] L. E. Stearns, 'The Problem of the Comic Supplement', *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* (December 1908).
[81] Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America*, p. 402.
[82] Ibid., p. 402.

The moral crusade against the comics in the middle years did not so much end as slowly fizzle out, with the number of articles and thought pieces criticizing the funnies dwindling after 1912. Elsa Nystrom makes the rather sweeping argument that the 'dominance of urban values in the 1920s completely disarmed the movement to ban the comic strip'.[83] But she also acknowledges that the acceleration of organised syndication in the mid-1910s had led to the proliferation of strips with a broad middle-class, appeal which came to eclipse the old working-class favourites that had so aggravated the comics' critics. Ralph Suiter also points to the significance of syndication in bringing an end to the war against the comics, though he sees it from a different perspective to Nystrom. Suiter argues convincingly that the movement died out in large part because the comics industry itself was changing in nature, moving away from a reliance on 'prank' development strips towards the middle-class, suburban strips mentioned by Nystrom. Additionally, the increase of daily strips appearing in papers after the introduction of *Mutt and Jeff* undermined the idea that the comics were aimed at children.[84] Ultimately, the campaigns had limited impact due to the simple fact that the comics' critics were swimming against the tide of syndication and demand.

A lack of surviving records or archival material means it is impossible to be sure whether the change in direction in the industry was a direct response to the criticisms of the moral crusaders, or whether it was part of the natural evolution towards strips more clearly aimed at adults, which

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[83] Nystrom, 'A Rejection of Order', p. 192.
[84] Suiter, ''Vulgarizing American Children': Navigating Respectability and Commercial Appeal in Early Newspaper Comics' As Suiter argues, the daily newspaper was considered to be aimed primarily at the adult members of a household, where the Sunday paper – and its various supplements – was enjoyed by the whole family.

had begun the previous decade, with the introduction of *Mutt and Jeff* in 1907. What is clear is that after several years of experimentation and evolution, during which time thousands of strips were tested out on the reading public, the newspaper comic strip had by 1912 gained a clear identity as a humour product, distinct from editorial cartoons, and achieved a prominent place in the American cultural landscape. The vast majority of Sunday newspapers included a comic supplement of some kind, and commentators and newspaper editors alike recognized the popularity of the funny papers, both in terms of their role as circulation builders and their impact on the sensibilities of their readers. Several 'big' strips had been introduced to the market and their characters and creators had already gained some degree of notoriety across the nation. With the introduction of daily strips and the increased efforts of syndicates to consolidate their hold on the market, the nature of the strips was beginning to change, with adult humour becoming just as important as strips featuring animals and children. As the campaigns to bring about an end to the comic supplement died down, the industry entered a period of expansion and growth, in which a new genre of strip, widely read across the nation, would become an important component of American culture, both reflecting and shaping social norms, and helping to consolidate the idea of American mainstream identity.

Expansion: national syndication & mainstream culture, 1912-1935

Applying the idea of phases to the study of any period is undeniably rather arbitrary. But 1912 marked something of a watershed year for the comics industry, with several events occurring that (while they had their roots in developments that had been slowly gaining force for years) would shape the nature and direction of the industry for decades to come. The first was the introduction

of Cliff Sterrett's strip *Positive Polly* in Hearst's *New York Journal.* The comic, which was accompanied by a 'topper' strip that examined the difference between marriage and courtship, would quickly change its name to *Polly and Her Pals*, reflecting the fact that it was as much about Polly's 'pals'– or family members – as the titular star herself. While the title of first family strip should go to George McManus's *The NewlyWeds*, which had been in circulation since 1904, *Polly* was significant in that its creation seemed to mark a change in direction in the industry, as over the next five years scores more strips focused daily on the everyday issues of middle-class, white suburban families. *Doings of the Duffs, The Bungle Family, The Gumps* and *Gasoline Alley* all followed within a few years, establishing the genre of suburban kitchen-sink drama on the comics page and making the decisive point that comics were for adults as much as for children.

The introduction of *Polly* was significant not just because of its subject matter, but also because – after initially appearing only on a Sunday – it appeared as a daily strip from 1913 onwards, joining *Mutt and Jeff* in Hearst's papers. It was soon accompanied by another daily strip, a new creation by George McManus. This strip, called *Bringing Up Father,* is widely considered to be the first comic to achieve international fame, as it was syndicated overseas from 1916.[85] It was also clearly designed for adult readers, examining themes of social mobility and status anxiety through the actions of an unwilling social climber (Jiggs) and his avaricious wife (Maggie). By 1920, the comic industry was providing material aimed at the entire family; with daily strips

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[85] Coupiere and Horn, *A History of the Comic Strip*, p. 45.

(appearing seven days a week) featuring everyday adult topics while some longstanding Sunday strips aimed at children retained their more unrestrained humour.

The second development to take place in 1912 was the creation of the Associated Newspapers Syndicate which, while of only minor interest in itself, again represented a shift in the industry, with the next six years seeing the formation of several key comic syndicates: Wheeler Syndicate in 1913, King Features in 1914, The (Public) Ledger Syndicate in 1915, Bell Syndicate in 1916 and the Chicago Tribune Syndicate in 1918. The mid-1910s are rightly seen by comics historians as a formative period in which national syndication, which had been thriving for over a decade, became big business, enabling the geographical and social expansion of the comics' readership, as the same material was distributed to smaller local papers in diverse locations. As previously argued, the comics had already made significant inroads in this area, with the strips' immediate popularity and early syndication efforts ensuring that they had a widespread impact. However, the combination of widespread daily national syndication, a clearly adult readership and the inclusion of everyday life as a principal subject matter made the comic industry from around 1912 particularly powerful as a conduit for social values.

The expansion of the comics industry in this period played a significant part in the consolidation of American culture as a whole. After the American Civil War, new forms of mass culture emerged that could be collectively consumed across the nation, aided by improvements in communications networks in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. This period saw the emergence of new mass cultural forms, which allowed for material to circulate nationally, and be consumed collectively by ever broader swathes of the population. The 1890s proved a crucial

decade in the move towards the nationalisation of culture, with the emergence of popular mass-market magazines, national advertising campaigns and the urban tabloids pioneered by Pulitzer and Hearst.[86] Popular magazines like *Harpers* and *Century* paved the way, distributed around the country from around the 1880s.[87] Some, like *McClures* and *Cosmopolitan* were specifically aimed at a wider working-class audience, and priced more cheaply than their more genteel rivals.[88] By 1900, the nation's largest magazine, *The Ladies' Home Journal* reached 850,000 subscribers. Though this represents a move towards a shared national culture, it should be remembered that these 850,000 subscribers made up just one percent of America's total population, which was over 76 million in 1900.[89]

Indeed, at the time that the funny papers were first syndicated to a national market, much of American popular culture was still produced and enjoyed by geographically and socially distinct groups. As Lawrence Levine has argued, the nineteenth century witnessed the development of distinct cultural hierarchies in America.[90] An awareness and enjoyment of 'culture' clearly delineated the elite from the masses, which shattered the less hierarchically organised shared public culture that had existed earlier in the century.[91] Until the comics, no one cultural medium bridged this gap with sufficient impact to create a sense of collective culture. The most popular and widely accessed form of mass entertainment was arguably on the stage, with vaudeville and

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[86] Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts, eds., *Hollywood's America: Twentieth-Century America through Film* (Chichester ; Malden, MA, 2010), p. 5.
[87] Reynolds J. Scott-Childress, ed., *Race and the Production of Modern American Nationalism* (New York, 1999), p. 402.
[88] Margaret A Blanchard, *History of the Mass Media in the United States: an Encyclopedia.* (Hoboken, 2013), p. 321.
[89] 'https://www.census.gov/population/estimates/nation/popclockest.txt [accessed 2nd August 2016]'.
[90] Lawrence W Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).
[91] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, p. 9.

burlesque enjoying their halcyon days from around 1890 to 1910.[92] Vaudeville shows accounted

for around 50% of theater goers in the 1890s.[93] Theaters sprang up in towns and cities across the

States, meaning that travelling shows could be seen in different locations across the country.

However, despite the genre's wide appeal, its audience was split down class lines due to the

relative cost of tickets. 'Big time' vaudeville shows, like those that operated in the Keith circuit,

employed expensive interior designers and stars who demanded high salaries, meaning they had

higher production costs – and admission prices – than the 'small time' shows.[94] Small time

theaters attracted working-class and immigrant audiences from local neighbourhoods, whereas

bigger theaters could draw in middle-class shoppers and suburbanites, who would travel to attend

a particular show.[95] Consequently, vaudeville did not provide audiences from different social

backgrounds with a shared cultural experience, as they would be viewing shows with different

content, performed by different actors, in different locations.

In fact, until the movie house and the radio really reached their prime in the 1920s, print media

was largely responsible for the movement towards a more standardised mass culture that was

shared across geographic and social divides. The part played by the comics was twofold. Firstly,

the national distribution of the strips meant that people from all walks of life were, for perhaps

the same time, reading the same material on a daily basis. Unlike many other forms of popular

culture, comics appealed to men and women, old and young, rich and poor alike.[96]

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[92] Lawrence E. Mintz, 'Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque', *MELUS*, 21 (Winter 1996), p. 19.
[93] Kobre, *The Yellow Press, and Gilded Age Journalism*, p. 17.
[94] M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill, 1999), p. 18.
[95] Ibid., p. 18.
[96] 'The Evolution of the Comic Picture and the Comic Artist'.

Secondly, the strips' role as a circulation builder extended the reach of the newspapers that they appeared in, which in turn facilitated the mass distribution of other content too – in particular advertising campaigns. Readers quickly came to expect a comic supplement with their paper; as one article published in 1905 noted, they would not subscribe to a paper that did not have one.[97] The addition of a comics supplement could have a profound impact on the circulation of a newspaper, as in the case of the *New York Sunday News,* whose circulation increased from 425,000 to 545,000 in just one week after they added a comics section.[98] Comics featured heavily in newspapers' own advertising, as they were deemed to be a major selling point for readers. Papers also emphasised the comics they featured when targeting potential advertisers, with adverts appearing on the same page as the most popular comics from around 1919.[99] The 1930s witnessed a 'rush' of comic advertising, after a Gallup Poll revealed how pervasive the comics had become, and concluding that most adults read the funnies with more care than they did the actual news stories.[100] By 1933, advertising space in *Comic Weekly* was selling for $16,000 to $17,500 a page, compared to average rates of $11,500 to $12,500 in *Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies' Home Journal*.[101] By then, the comics had established themselves as a leading force in the creation and spread of a mass culture in America.

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[97] 'The Evolution of the Comic Picture and the Comic Artist'.
[98] Arthur Crawford, 'At Last, At Last! Arthur Crawford Talks for Publication About Tribune Comics', *The Tribune* (April 1928).
[99] 'The Promise Fulfilled', *Ardmore Daily Ardemoreite* (27 May 1919).
[100] Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, p. 110; Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America*, p. 592.
[101] Ibid., p. 112.

The comics as a national culture

Ian Gordon's *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture* made an excellent case for the early
popularity of syndicated comics. Gordon examined a selection of Sunday newspapers from
across the United States published in 1903, 1908 and 1913 and recorded whether or not they
contained a comic supplement. His sample demonstrated that by 1903, newspapers in at least 20
cities carried comic supplements, which were provided by a range of syndicates. This led Gordon
to conclude that by this time, the comics as a genre were a national phenomenon and not limited
to a solely urban audience.[102] He also states that 'many of these newspapers carried the same
strips'.[103] Unfortunately, he does not provide detailed data as to which comics appeared in which
papers, or include references to the information he provides on the origins of the syndicates he
refers to. By 1908, almost 75% of Sunday newspapers in Gordon's sample included a comic
supplement, with material provided by six companies (of which three were dominant). This led
him to argue that by this time, the strips were a 'shared national cultural artefact'.[104]

The analysis of Holtz's reference guide supports Gordon's conclusion to a large extent. It is clear
that the comic strip as a cultural medium spread across the country very quickly, with
newspapers wasting no time in adopting this new feature. It is also clear, however, that far more
than six companies were distributing material, even at this early date. 17 different syndicates and
distributors can be found for the comics beginning with 'A' that started in the years up to 1903 –
even as a minimum number this greatly exceeds Gordon's six companies.[105] The earliest years of

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[102] Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945*, p. 40.
[103] Ibid., p. 41.
[104] Ibid.
[105] These were: *Boston Globe, Chicago American (Hearst), Chicago Chronicle, Chicago Daily News, Chicago Tribune, McClure, Minneapolis Journal, New York Journal, New York World, North American Syndicate,*

the industry saw massive growth, with the humour strip genre – in itself an entirely new concept – becoming established very quickly. However, it took slightly longer for the industry to mature. It was in the 1910s, with the establishment of several major syndicates and the introduction of immediately-popular family strips, that the comics industry became big business, characterised by an organized, regulated market dominated by a few large syndicates, which employed well-paid and well-known artists to produce strips that were sold to large numbers of newspapers across the country, and read by large proportions of the population.

My research builds on Gordon's work, seeking to establish more clearly the timeline in which the comics industry matured. I track the appearance of specific comics across a much larger body of nearly 500 newspapers provided by two online archives, in order to test how quickly the *same* material became available to readers across the nation. To determine which strips appeared in which papers, the title of the strip was entered into a keyword search (thanks to OCR technology, all the newspapers in these archives are keyword searchable) and the results then checked to ensure that only the strips themselves, and not just references to them, were recorded in the findings. If a strip appears once in a newspaper in any given year, it is marked as present in that paper. Similarly, if a strip is mentioned in an advertisement for another paper's comic line up it is recorded as present for that other paper. In order to provide meaningful analysis from the vast data recorded (there are over 5,000 individual 'present' records across the 35-year period, and another 28,000 'not present' results) I have grouped the findings into seven five-year time periods (1900-1905, 1906-1910, 1911-1915, 1916-1920, 1921-1925, 1926-1930 and 1931-1935).

Philadelphia Enquirer, San Francisco Bulletin, San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco Examiner, St Louis Globe Democrat, St Louis Republic, World Color Printing.

Zip codes have been assigned to each paper based on its place of publication, in order to enable mapping.

The main limitation of this analysis is that one cannot assume that the absence of a result in a certain area necessarily signals the absence of the strip in *any* paper in that area. While the two archives used contain a very large database of papers (which is growing all the time) this is still only a small proportion of the newspapers in production across the country at any given time. The major syndicates have not preserved records of the distribution of their strips, meaning that the only way to measure saturation is by looking in the papers themselves.[106] However, the marked increase in distribution of the strips tracked across the time period enables the tentative conclusion that up until around 1910, while comics as a genre had found their way into a majority of newspapers across the country, it took a few years for specific 'big' strips to completely saturate the market. These were distributed by a few syndicates whose domination of the industry was confirmed by around 1920. This process began with the publication of the earliest strips, gained momentum between 1900 and 1912 and escalated rapidly with the acceleration of organized syndication from 1912 to 1920.

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[106] Mark Johnson, 'US Comics' (10 March 2016).
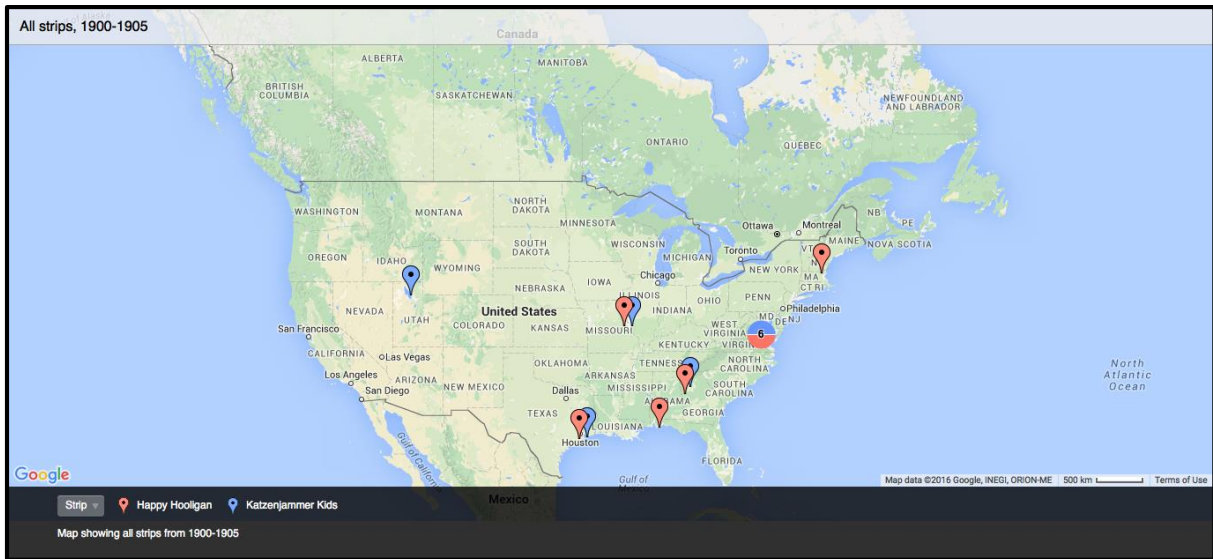
Figure 6: Map showing the first years of syndication – 1900-1905.
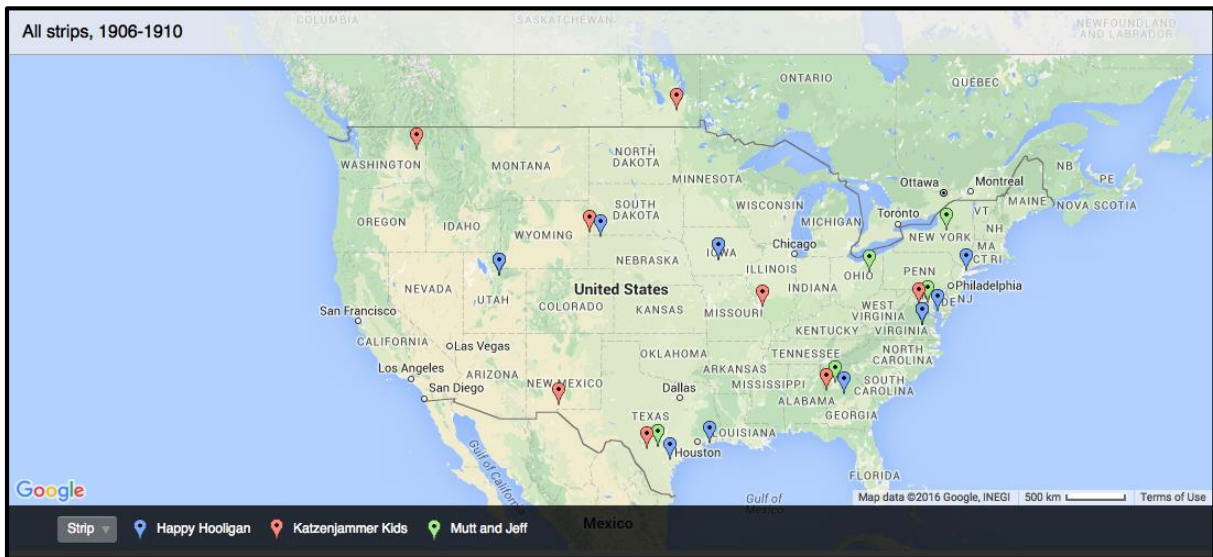
Figure 7: Map showing the first years of syndication – 1906-1910.

The first few years of syndication saw a steady increase in comic output. By 1905, both *Happy Hooligan* and *Katzenjammer Kids* were both being distributed more widely by the Hearst syndicate (later to be known as King Features) than in the New York based paper that they

originated, appearing in papers in at least 15 newspapers across eight states.[107] Given the limitations of the archive, this is the minimum number of papers in which they appeared: it is very likely that the true total was much higher. While distribution still seems to be clustered around the East Coast, the *Katzenjammer Kids* strip was being sold at least as far west as Mormon Salt Lake City, and both strips appeared in Texas. Evidently Hearst was selling both features to several of the same papers, with the pair featuring alongside one another in six of the newspapers. Over the next five years, and with the addition of *Mutt and Jeff* to Hearst's offering, this increased to at least 24 newspapers across 11 states, cementing Hearst's dominant position in the industry. One of Hearst's flagship papers, the *San Francisco Chronicle,* is known to have been the first paper to feature *Mutt and Jeff*, but is not available through the Chronicling America archive. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that all three strips appeared as far west as California by 1910. *Katzenjammer Kids* was also appearing in Canada. *Mutt and Jeff* was added to the offering of two papers that already featured *Katzenjammer Kids* and *Happy Hooligan*, as well as being sold to rival papers in the same area (hence closely clustered mapping pins) and papers in other areas. None of the papers that had held one or both of the strips in the 1900-1905 period dropped them before 1910, suggesting that editors had accepted the value of investing in a quality comic feature. The president of the National Association of Newspaper Circulation Managers elected in 1906 was known to rue the fact that he could not get rid of the comics, because they had already established their utility as a circulation builder.[108]

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[107] Atlanta Constitution (Georgia), Boston Post (Massachusetts), Galveston Daily News (Texas), Pensacola Journal (Florida), Richmond Times Dispatch (Virginia), Salt Lake Herald (Utah), St Louis Republican (Missouri), Times Dispatch (Virginia), Washington Post (Washington).
[108] Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America*, p. 402.
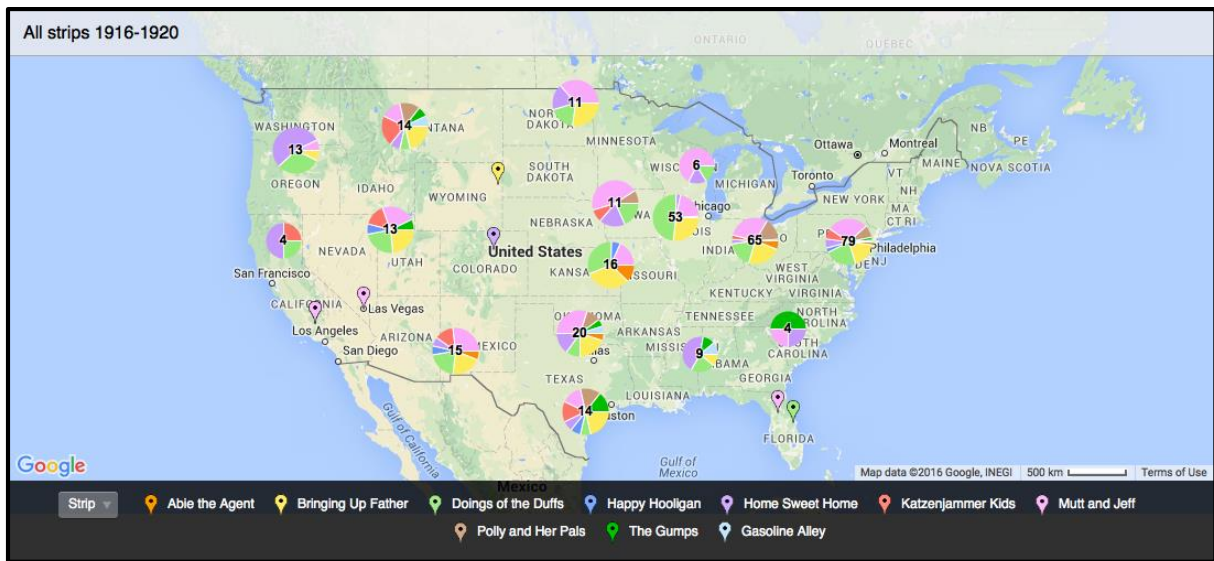
Figure 8: Map showing the growth of syndication – 1916-1920.

The most significant growth in the industry occurred between 1910 and 1920, as several more 'big' strips were added to the syndicates' books and made available to newspaper editors across the country. By 1915, 10 of our 11 strips were appearing in at least 112 newspapers across 28 states; by 1920 this had risen to 243 papers in 42 states (as well as appearances in Canada and Jamaica).[109] This level of saturation was maintained through the 1920s, before dropping off slightly in the latter half of the decade, and more dramatically in the early 1930s. While anomalies within the archives may have had some impact on the figures, this decline is most likely to be as a result of the growing popularity of adventure strips after the Depression. Comic artist Roy Crane termed the early 30s the 'era of melodrama', a time when editors suddenly discovered that the adventure strips, and not the joke strips, were holding up their circulation. In this period, he argues, 'adventure was king' and joke strips 'folded or changed to adventures

[109] The states where strips cannot be found are: Arkansas, Alaska, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Maine, New Hampshire and Rhode Island.

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overnight', with all but the best of the funny strips becoming 'old hat'.[110] The other significant factor affecting the results in this particular study is the fact that *Doings of the Duffs,* which had appeared in 82 papers between 1921 and 1925, folded in 1931, after several years of uncertainty that followed the death of its original creator, Walter Allman, in 1924.

	1900-1905	1906-1910	1911-1915	1916-1920	1921-1925	1926-1930	1931-1935	Overall
Abie the Agent [1914]	0	0	6	10	8	4	2	21
Bringing Up Father [1913]	0	0	35	67	103	89	55	165
Doings of the Duffs [1914]	0	0	10	81	82	15	2	133
Gasoline Alley [1918]	0	0	0	4	20	20	19	30
Happy Hooligan [1900]	8	12	13	7	12	9	3	35
Home Sweet Home [1918]	0	0	0	35	32	23	20	85
Katzenjammer Kids [1897]	7	11	18	19	22	17	13	54
Mutt and Jeff [1907]	0	6	61	90	46	36	33	170
Polly and Her Pals [1912]	0	0	18	24	29	42	16	89
The Gumps [1917]	0	0	0	13	61	54	48	87
Tillie the Toiler [1921]	0	0	0	0	23	49	41	67
Combined	15	24	112	243	258	202	159	485

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[110] Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center: Roy Crane Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, Roy Crane, 'Autobiographical Sketch', undated.

Figure 9: Number of newspapers that the strip appeared in 1900-1935.

	1900-1905	1906-1910	1911-1915	1916-1920	1921-1925	1926-1930	1931-1935	Overall
Abie the Agent [1914]	0	0	5	9	7	3	2	14
Bringing Up Father [1913]	0	0	16	30	33	30	21	39
Doings of the Duffs [1914]	0	0	7	31	30	12	2	40
Gasoline Alley [1918]	0	0	0	4	15	13	12	20
Happy Hooligan [1900]	8	8	10	6	6	5	2	19
Home Sweet Home [1918]	0	0	0	20	18	15	13	32
Katzenjammer Kids [1897]	7	8	13	13	13	10	9	23
Mutt and Jeff [1907]	0	5	26	28	20	19	19	41
Polly and Her Pals [1912]	0	0	12	9	16	20	9	31
The Gumps [1917]	0	0	0	11	28	21	24	38
Tillie the Toiler [1921]	0	0	0	0	15	23	18	25
Combined	8	11	28	42	42	41	37	48

Figure 10: Number of states that the strip appeared (i.e. at least one newspaper from this state carried the strip).

The tables above demonstrate the rise and decline of the era of the funny paper as a whole during

its golden age. Across the entire period, readers in all 48 states had access to a selection of the

same material on a daily basis.[111] Features distributed by William Randolph Hearst's *King Features Syndicate* made up over 80% of these appearances, appearing in at least 44 states, suggesting that individuals like Moses Koenigsberger, who provided direction to all comic artists attached to the syndicate, had unprecedented levels of influence on American popular culture as a whole. The fact that the industry so quickly spread beyond the East Coast, into the South, Mid-West and West Coast, is more significant than the absolute number of newspapers that the strips appeared in. As discussed above, this number simply reflects the number of papers held by one archive and represents only a small proportion of the overall level of saturation of these strips in particular, and syndicated content in general (given that this specific study has focused on 11 out of thousands of strips). What we can say for sure, however, is that by the 1920s, the syndication of comic strips meant that Americans from New York to California were laughing at the same jokes over their breakfast. With the exception of *Abie the Agent,* whose 'East coast' ethnic humour limited its success in the West and South, all the strips were distributed widely across the country, with no particular regional variations detectable.

Readership & reception

Who read the comics?

Documenting the distribution of the comics also enables us to make some fairly convincing assumptions about the nature and extent of their readership. As well as being nationally distributed, the strips also bridged geographic divides. They appeared in both urban centres and

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[111] Between the admission of Arizona and New Mexico in 1912 and the admission of Alaska and Hawaii in 1959, there were 48 and not 50 United States.

small town and rural areas, with the comics appearing in papers across states without major cities like Montana, Idaho and Iowa.[112] The broad family appeal of the strips has already been outlined: men and women, adults and children read the funny papers. Although there is no specific data documenting the financial or class position of the readers of these various papers, the sheer number of the publications in which the strips appeared, and the public perception of their ubiquity, suggests that they were also read across the social spectrum.

What is much more difficult to surmise is whether the comics in this study had any following in black and white ethnic communities. Certainly, we know that William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer deliberately sought to gain market dominance by appealing to urban immigrant readers, and that the early funnies were a central element of that strategy. Hearst actually ran one German language paper, the *Deutsches Journal,* in which *Happy Hooligan, Bringing Up Father* and *The Katzenjammer Kids* appeared (translated into German) from 1913.[113] Peter Conolly-Smith notes that comic strips were unique to the *Journal* among New York's German immigrant newspapers.[114] I have not found any other examples of mainstream comics appearing in the foreign-language press in the period, though there may be examples of which I am unaware. Similarly, the dedicated black newspapers of the period (for instance the *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Philadelphia Tribune*) appear to have published their own strips, which

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[112] Montana papers: *Anaconda Standard, Billings Daily Gazette, Butte Daily Post, Glasgow Courier, Great Falls Daily Tribune, Independent Helena Montana, and Montana Standard. Idaho papers: Idaho Recorder, Twin Falls Daily Times. Iowa papers: Oelwein Daily Register, Ottumwa Daily Courier, Ottumwa Semi-weekly Courier, Ottumwa Tri-weekly Courier, Perry Daily Chief, Perry Daily Chronicle, Pomeroy Herald, Roland Record, Rolfe Arrow, Sioux City Journal, Sioux City Viewer, Spirit Lane Beacon, The Daily Gate City, The Denison Review, Waterloo Daily Courier, Waterloo Evening Courier, Webster City Freeman*.

[113] Peter Conolly-Smith, 'Transforming an Ethnic Readership Through 'Word and Image': William Randolph Hearst's 'Deutsches Journal' and New York's German-Language Press, 1895—1918', *American Periodicals*, 19 (2009), p. 72.

[114] Ibid., p. 72.

were not distributed more widely than their own papers.[115] In a new book, Tim Jackson has painstakingly traced the contribution of black comic artists, but his study makes no reference to mainstream syndicated strips entering the black press.[116]

The fact that the comics in this study were not featured in niche papers created for a specifically ethnic market does not necessarily mean that they were not read and enjoyed by black and immigrant Americans, however. The case of Chicago may be taken as an example. In 1909, the *Chicago Defender* proclaimed it had a readership of 25,000 people.[117] This number was based on the paper's circulation (around 4000) multiplied by the number of people that the editors believed read each copy.[118] This 25,000 figure was more than the combined readership of all the other black newspapers available in Chicago at the time, and represented around one out of every ten black Chicagoans.[119] A generous estimate, therefore, suggests that the black press reached around 20 percent of the black population of the city at this time. It seems very unlikely that the remaining 80 percent of the city's African Americans simply did not read a newspaper. It is much more likely that they read another national or local paper like those in which the syndicated comics appeared. It seems reasonable to assert that rapid and widespread syndication meant that Americans of all backgrounds had access to, and were likely to have at least occasionally read, the same comics. What is much less clear is how they would have received them, particularly given how embedded racial hierarchy was in the strips.

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[115] In 1920 the *Chicago Defender* introduced its own black comic, entitled *Bungleton Green*.
[116] Tim Jackson, *Pioneering Cartoonists of Color* (Oxford, Mississippi, 2016).
[117] Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America* (Boston, 2016), p. 27.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.

Reader reactions - the cult of the every day

We do not have a demographic breakdown of comic readership in this period. Similarly, the lack of reader surveys or opinion polls means that it is not possible to prove with any degree of accuracy what effect the comics had on the people that read them. Where reception studies scholars have been able to assess the impact of TV shows on their audiences firsthand, we cannot measure the level of engagement of readers or demonstrate the number of minutes or hours spent by individuals reading them.[120] Any conclusions about the reception of the strips by their readers must be therefore based on the application of anecdotal evidence and contemporary commentary on the comics' role in American society. Such material, insofar as it is available, enables us to state with some confidence that the strips were very popular, and were read by a broad cross-section of the American population. It also suggests that readers often identified personally with the characters and storylines of the strips, in the same way that modern audiences might react to the characters in a sitcom or soap opera. This level of personal identification by the strips' readers adds weight to the theory that the comics had the power to help shape social conventions and define the boundaries of normative behaviour. This is reinforced by the fact that the same strips were consumed on such a frequent basis, and that many of the messages and storylines were extremely repetitive.

The popularity of the comic strips, in particular the second wave of 'everyday' strips, and the way they were received by their readers was a new kind of cultural phenomenon, and reveals the funnies as an integral part of American life. Readers became extremely invested in their

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[120] See John Fiske, 'Audiencing: a cultural studies approach to watching television', *Poetics,* 21 (1992), pp. 345-359.

favourite comic characters, elevating them to the status of pseudo-celebrities. In a Newspaper Comics Council Bulletin, from March 11th 1959, the author noted that in a 1923 *Gasoline Alley* strip, Frank King had stated that Skeezix – a fictional toddler –would inherit a sum of money on his 35th birthday. When that day came, 33 years later, fans of the strip wrote in to local papers and to the syndicate that distributed the comic, asking why Skeezix had not received his inheritance.[121] Over the course of his life on the comic page, Skeezix also received numerous gifts and cards (via his creator Sidney Smith).[122] All areas of the comics industry actively encouraged this personification, and fostered the emotional connection between readers and characters to sell more papers. Syndicates created promotional material and newspapers ran features treating characters as if they were real people. When the fictitious Andy Gump stood for election to Congress in 1922, several papers printed announcements of his candidacy as a means of advertising their comic supplements.[123] During the actual Congressional election happening at the time, Andy Gump was reported to have received thousands of write-in votes and according to a continuity writer for the strip, in one state 'a candidate for high office used Andy's speeches word for word and was elected by a thumping majority'.[124] Several newspapers ran a competition to name the baby born in *The Doings of the Duffs* in 1917, stoking up interest in the strip and encouraging readers to think of the characters as real people to whom they could relate.[125] In 1933, United States Vice-President Charles Curtis described this phenomenon, when he wrote of *Bringing Up Father*: 'It was as though they were flesh and blood persons, old friends

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[121] Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: Toni Mendez Collection, TM P5/33 – Council Research –The Comics, 'Newspaper Comics Council Bulletin', 11 March 1959.
[122] 'Life Really Begins at 40 for 'Skeezix'', *Editor and Publisher* (11 February 1961).
[123] 'Andrew Gump, 'The Fighting Congressman' Watch Him Get Elected', *Democrat Chronicle* (28 October 1922).
[124] Abel, Robert H., ed., *The Funnies*, p. 24.
[125] See for example 'Untitled Feature', *The Day Book* (9 March 1917).

of whom I thought highly, whose lives, mostly mishaps for Jiggs, I have followed through the years with amusement and interest.'[126]

Comic artist Roy Crane, in a set of research notes for a paper on 'Comics as the Great Unrecognised Art', theorised that people read comics because of an emotional hunger that was not satisfied by their 'hum drum existence' that resembled the Ford Assembly Line. The comics (and later the radio, movies and popular fiction) appealed to the readers' emotions, giving them an escape from their own 'drab and uneventful lives'. Furthermore, he wrote: 'Comic strip characters are local people, neighbors. We KNOW them. We know them better than we know anybody in this room. WHY? Because they've revealed their inner selves to us. Most of us put up a false front, hiding our hungers, our deepest thoughts... but not a comic book character.'[127] The role of the comics as a means of escapism was also noted by an editorial in the *Logansport Pharos Tribune* in 1928, which noted that the comic strip showed 'human characteristics in exaggerated form…. So direct and unmistakeable that even the most obtuse cannot fail to recognise them… this is at least an ingenious explanation of the popularity of the comic strip... its escape value.'[128] In this regard, the comics were perhaps the first medium that fulfilled the psychological need in readers that, years later, soap operas and sitcoms would address, enabling readers to escape into the recognisable but exaggerated world of identifiable types whose experiences were reassuringly similar to their own.

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[126] Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: George McManus biographical file, Oversize, Pamphlet: '20 Years of Jiggs and Maggie', 1933.
[127] Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center: Roy Crane Papers, Box 11, Folder 4, Research notes - Comics - 'The Unrecognised Art', undated.
[128] 'Editorial', *Logansport Pharos Tribune* (18 February 1928).

The use of continuity in the strips, the domestic suburban setting and the subtle elements of social satire combined to create an entertainment genre whose popularity surpassed any other medium, both in terms of the size of the audience and the level of engagement that the audience had with the strips' storylines and characters. Reading the comic strips became an integral part of the experience of reading the daily newspaper, providing a ritual aspect just as the newspaper itself did. This experience had many functions. As Abel and White argue, since much of comic strip humour pokes fun at everyday domestic occurrences, the strips alleviated some of the tensions which attended such occurrences in real life.[129]

Undoubtedly, different readers engaged with the strips in a variety of ways. Like any cultural product, the jokes in the comics enabled their audience to find meanings that reflected their own perspective as much as that of the comic artist who produced the strip. As Margo Anderson argues, words and images carry multiple and complex meanings that have explicit and implicit connections to other keywords and concepts.[130] Particularly as the comics evolved in the 1910s into humorous parodies of everyday life, they functioned as an important social reference point, both reflecting the normative values that cartoonists and syndicates perceived to structure the lives of their readers, and helping to construct a vision of American reality that shaped readers' understandings of social boundaries. This push-and pull-relationship, between reflecting and shaping popular opinion, was central to the evolution of the comics industry as it underwent a period of consolidation and expansion after 1912.

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[129] Abel, Robert H., ed., *The Funnies*, p. 237.
[130] Margo Anderson, 'The Language of Class in Twentieth-Century America', *Social Science History*, 12 (1988), p. 351.

As the comic industry exploded in the first three decades of the twentieth century, it underwent considerable change. Due to the paucity of source material kept by the syndicates, very little is known about the way that they operated, or the process by which a comic artist's idea became a regular feature in hundreds of newspapers. Why did certain comics succeed where others failed? How far did comic artists consider themselves social commentators, and how much freedom of expression did they possess, once their work was taken on by a syndicate? To what extent did the professionalization of the industry in the course of this period affect the content in the strips themselves, and how did this contribute to the standardisation of popular culture in the period? The use of several previously unexplored archives held by Syracuse and Ohio State universities has helped to provide at least partial answers to these questions. While the syndicates themselves do not have archival records available (*King Features* archivist Mark Johnson recalled 'horror stories' of records being thrown into dumpsters by unconcerned syndicates) several individuals have kept correspondence and business documents that shed light on the workings of the syndicates.[131] Among these are the personal papers of comic artists, including Roy Crane, Harry Herschfield, Larry Harris and Will Eisner. Additionally, a series of interviews with comic artists and commentators, recorded by the National Cartoonists Society in the early 1960s, discusses the early days of syndication in some detail. Combined with information taken from newspaper and journal articles, it has been possible to construct a reasonable picture of the inner workings of the

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[131] Johnson, 'US Comics'.

syndicate business, and the interactions between comic artists, syndicate representatives, newspaper editors and audiences.

The professionalisation of print culture

During the Progressive Era, broader communications and managerial revolutions facilitated a transformation of what Christopher P. Wilson terms 'the American marketplace of words' into a print culture industry with both a fully national reach and modern business structure.[132] For the first time, Wilson argues, professional authors and creators of cultural content (like comic strips) achieved a widely recognized place in American social life.[133]. This shift in the structure and organization of the syndicated comic – and indeed entire – newspaper business reflects the widespread interpretation of the Progressive Era as a period of modernization, in which educated, middle-class professionals sought to reorganize the public and private sectors, with a distinct focus on structural reform and administration.[134] In this interpretation, which remains influential, Progressives pursued progress through efficiency and productivity, with businesses as well as government organizations part of the overall 'search for order' so famously outlined by Robert Wiebe in his overview of the period.[135] The bureaucratic culture of the Progressive era embraced the upgrading of standards and restriction of entry into certain professions, meaning that 'expert professionals' received greater prestige and economic reward.[136]

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[132] Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (2010), p. 2.
[133] Wilson, *The Labor of Words*, p. 2.
[134] Catherine Cocks, Peter C. Holloran, and Alan Lessoff, *Historical Dictionary of the Progressive Era* (Lanham, Maryland, 2009), p. 321.
[135] Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order: 1877 - 1920* (New York, 2007).
[136] Karen Pastorello, *The Progressives: Activism and Reform in American Society, 1893-1917* (Hoboken, 2013), pp. 80–93.

The narratives of modernization and professionalization can be applied convincingly to the early years of the newspaper comic industry. Comics became valuable commodities, with the early years of the century seeing the development – and clarification – of intellectual property law in relation to the ownership of, and rights over, both strips and characters. Comic artists, as per Wilson's point, became recognized as professionals who had a significant role in cultural production. Finally the process of the strips' production became increasingly bureaucratized and regulated in the 1920s and 1930s, as market demands shaped the production process and determined the roles of comic artists, syndicates and editors.

Intellectual property

Within a few years of syndicate operations commencing, a successful comic had become a valuable commodity. Competition between newspapers (and later syndicates) over the rights to a certain strip or comic artist occurred as early as 1896, when William Randolph Hearst lured Richard Outcault (the creator of the *Yellow Kid*) away from his rival Joseph Pulitzer, in whose paper - the *New York World* - the character originally appeared.[137] When Pulitzer sued Hearst, the judge ruled that both Hearst and Pulitzer could run versions of the strip – George Luks could continue to produce the strip entitled *Hogan's Alley* and featuring Mickey Dugan (the infamous Yellow Kid) for Pulitzer, but Outcault had the right to draw his character, of which he now had copyright ownership, for Hearst.[138]

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[137] Donald Dewey, *The Art of Ill Will: The Story of American Political Cartoons* (October 2008), p. 39.
[138] Ibid., p. 39.

In 1912, when Rudolph Dirks (creator of the *Katzenjammer Kids*) sought to move his strip from Hearst's newspaper group to Pulitzer's, questions around ownership that had been debated when Pulitzer and Hearst had fought over the *Yellow Kid* at the turn of the century re-emerged. The court case between Dirks and Hearst confirmed the overall ownership rights of the employer, but recognised the right of the artist to draw the same characters under another title.[139] The disagreement resulted in the simultaneous production of two versions of the strip, *The Katzenjammer Kids* drawn by Harold Knerr in Hearst's papers and *The Captain and the Kids* drawn by Dirks in Pulitzer's. The case, which went all the way to the Supreme Court, 'made front pages all over the country, became required reading for the law students and established the precedent that an artist could take his skill and characters to another market, but not copyright a title'.[140]

Within just two years, the precedent had been reversed. Bud Fisher, creator of *Mutt and Jeff*, copyrighted his creations before he left Hearst's Star Company to move to the Wheeler syndicate. Hearst wanted to continue producing *Mutt and Jeff* using another cartoonist, as had been done with the *Katzenjammer Kids*, and a lengthy legal battle between them commenced.[141] Again, the case was widely reported in the press. *Goodwin's Weekly* provided an 'inside scoop' on why *Mutt and Jeff* had been absent from the funny pages, explaining that Fisher's contract was soon to run out and he was not intending to renew it.[142] Hearst issued the order that they should hold up the Mutt and Jeff strips and release them when they appeared in opposition

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[139] Caniff, 'Production and Distribution', p. 129.
[140] Helen Staunton, '30 Years of 'Kids' 'Still Hard', Says Dirks', *Syndicates* (1947).
[141] Bud Fisher, *The Mutt and Jeff Cartoons* (Greenfield, 1987).
[142] 'The Inside on Mutt and Jeff', *Goodwin's Weekly* (7 August 1915).

journals. Fisher picked up on this and stopped drawing them, hoping to break his contract so that he could leave early.[143] Ultimately, Fisher was victorious, due to his sensible decision to secure copyright over the characters, and Hearst was forbidden to have another artist produce a strip featuring the pair. The opinion of the court, decided on 14th July 1921, stated that the 'grotesque figures' as well as the names "Mutt" and "Jeff" applied to them 'have in consequence of the way in which they have been exploited by the respondent and the appearance and assumed characters of the imaginary figures have been maintained, acquired a meaning apart from their primary meaning, which is known as a secondary meaning'.[144] Fisher originated the figures, thus 'his genius pervades all that they appear to do or say.' The court also noted that Fisher was the owner of the property right existing in the characters represented in such figures and names, and he created the characters before entering into any contract with the Star Company and Hearst. Furthermore, the publication of an alternative version of the strip by another artist employed by Hearst could directly impact on Fisher, as it might 'result in the public tiring of the "Mutt and Jeff" cartoons by reason of inferior imitations or otherwise, and in any case in financial damage to the respondent and an unfair appropriation of his skill and the celebrity acquired by him in originating, producing and maintaining the characters and figures so as to continue the demand for further cartoons in which they appear'.[145]

This decision opened up numerous opportunities for artists with popular strips, and paved the way for the mass expansion of comic characters into advertising, consumer goods and other forms of popular culture. It also gave considerable power to the most successful artists in

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[143] Ibid.
[144] http://www.courts.state.ny.us/reporter/archives/fisher_star.htm [last accessed 25 February 2019]
[145] Ibid.

contract negotiations with their employers, as they could now take their creations with them once their contracts were up.

The professional comic artist

The period saw the growth not just of the comic strip genre, but also the emergence of the concept of the professional comic artist. By the 1920s, a career as a successful comic artist was a very desirable one, affording both celebrity status and high rates of pay.[146] Many of the comic artists in this study started off on small sums, but once they became big names went on to become some of the wealthiest men in America. George McManus started off on just $5 a week (around half the national average wage at the time); Harry Herschfield was on half that again.[147] Yet by the 1920s, being a syndicate cartoonist was a serious – and lucrative – business, with one, Sidney Smith, securing a contract for a million dollars across ten years in 1922.[148] While there were dozens of strips on the syndicates' books, the artists that created the most popular and successful strips earned both celebrity status and enormous salaries. As early as 1915, a report claimed that comic artists earnt more than most bank presidents.[149] A 1922 advert for a book on how to become a comic artist, published in *Photoplay* magazine, proclaimed that 'Cartoonists Make Big Money', estimating the figure as anything between $10,000 and $100,000 a year.[150] A 1923 article on Sidney Smith, creator of *The Gumps*, put his salary at over $125,000 a year –

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[146] Dewey, *The Art of Ill Will*, p. 41.
[147] Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: George McManus biographical file, Folder 0, Newspaper clipping: 'Celebrates Jiggs's 25th Anniversary', undated.
[148] 'Sidney Smith, 58, Creator of Gumps, Dies in Auto Crash', *Alton Evening Telegraph* (21 October 1935).
[149] 'Nation's Laughs Profitable to the Comic Artist', *The Sun* (May 1915).
[150] 'Cartoonists Make Big Money', *Photoplay Magazine* (3 February 1922).

worth somewhere between $2,000,000 and $8,000,000 in 2015.[151] The contract made between

Bud Fisher (who wrote *Mutt and Jeff)* and the Bell Syndicate in 1921, which was in effect until

1930, called for a minimum of $3,000 a week, meaning that Fisher earnt at least $156,000 a year.

To earn this salary, Fisher had to furnish no fewer than 260 seven-column strips (dailies), and 52

full page drawings (for the Sunday page) a year.[152] These enormous salaries would continue even

into the years of the depression. In 1933, a front page article in the *Lethbridge Herald* reported

that despite the economic climate, the top artists were receiving up to $1,600 a week – or

$83,000 a year, compared to a national average of just $20.[153]

Alongside the large pay packets, the top comic artists of the 1910s and 1920s also became

extremely well known, receiving considerable attention from the press. In promotional material

for a newspaper's comic supplement, the comic artist, and not just the strip, was usually

mentioned, often in a way that suggested they were working exclusively for the paper (when of

course they were not). For example, a 1921 advertisement for the *Washington Herald's* Comic

Section proclaimed: 'Among the Herald's dispensers of laughter-tonic are four of the most

famous cartoonists and comic strip artists in America. Get the Herald regularly and you'll laugh

every day with these inimitable portrayers of the humorous side of life'.[154] The comic artists

themselves also gained attention and became recognizable public figures. Interviews with comic

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[151] Ben Mellon, 'Creator of Famous Gump Family in Cartoons Began Drawing at Age of 3', *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* (4 February 1923); 'https://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/relativevalue.php', [accessed 28 July 2016].
[152] 'Bud Fisher Makes $3000 a Week', *Editor and Publisher* (undated).
[153] 'The Left Hand Corner', *Lethbridge Herald* (8 April 1933); Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: John Canemaker Collection, JC 2/9 NYC Research, 'Wages and Hours in the United States', (undated).
[154] 'Let's All Laugh Every Day', *Washington Herald* (31 July 1921).

artists were commonplace, and papers also reported on developments in their lives. In the 1930s,

Bud Fisher's divorce, the death of his father and his holiday plans all attracted column space.[155]

Despite the promises of the many articles encouraging aspiring young illustrators to join the

profession, the high salaries, national recognition and industry respect achieved by artists like

Fisher, Tuthill, Sterrett and McManus were by no means a universal standard. Less well-known

artists, even those employed by the larger syndicates, did not earn such sums. NEA adventure

cartoonist Roy Crane's accounting records for 1934 reveal that in April, he made $1,375.43, but

had expenses of $850. His wage for the month was therefore $525.43.[156] By the 1930s, a union

had been set up to represent artists. A pamphlet urging cartoonists to unionise reminded them

that the flooded labour market had meant that, for many years, they had been exploited by the

syndicates and papers, receiving low fees and late payments.[157] *Judge* magazine agreed in 1937

to increase the minimum wage paid to union cartoonists by one third.[158] Furthermore, as the

years passed, the expectations of the syndicates increased enormously, with only the very best

comics taken up for distribution. As a Publishers Syndicate representative explained in a letter to

comic artist Larry Harris in 1939, at this time, 'the supply of strips on the market far outweighs

the demand and nothing short of an outright world-beater stands any chance.'[159] Harris and others

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[155] Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: Bud Fisher autobiographical file, Folder 2, newspaper clipping: 'The Father of Mutt and Jeff has Troubles of his Own', 20th April 1905'; 'Bud Fisher Makes $3000 a Week'; 'Mutt and Jeff Away For a Few Days' Vacation', *San Francisco Chronicle* (8 June 1919).

[156] Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center: Roy Crane Papers, Box 1, Folder 4, 'Captain Easy Accounting for Period Ending 24 March 1934'.

[157] Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center: Vernon Greene Papers, Box 17, Folder 17, clipping: 'Cartoonists See Need for CIO Affiliation', undated.

[158] Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center: Vernon Greene Papers, Box 17, Folder 17, 'Cartoonists Guild of America Bulletin', 23 March 1937.

[159] Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: Larry Harris Collection, LH 17/1 Syndicate Correspondence 1930s/1940s, Letter from Publishers Syndicate to Larry Harris, 23 February 1939.

like him had to turn to budget syndicates – who provided a 'blanket service' of strips to papers, rather than selling individual strips on their own merit – or try and get jobs as assistants or ghost writers supporting the main creator of a high profile strip. By the 1930s, the comic industry had evolved from a dislocated group of artists into a modern bureaucratic structure, governed by self-imposed standards that resulted in the existence of the career comic artist – whose mastery of the craft was rewarded by monetary gain, social status and prestige – as well as a supporting cast of second-tier contributors and individuals seeking to enter the profession.

The process of production

The period of the study also saw the transformation of the process of comic strip production. Before the advent of mass syndication, the artist was the employee of a newspaper, or of a publisher who owned a chain of newspapers, and his strip appeared only in this newspaper or newspaper group. He would usually work in the newspaper offices, occasionally moving away from his usual strip to do a sports or political drawing.[160] As such, early strips were often aimed at a fairly limited audience: the readership being located in one town or coming from a particular demographic. Additionally, most early strips did not cover potentially controversial adult topics.

As the comics industry matured and modernised, the interactive relationship between comic artists, syndicate representatives, newspaper editors and the mass market also changed. Their ownership of their strips and characters ensured that comic artists retained a degree of power. However, the need for comics to appeal to an increasingly broad readership – in terms of age,

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[160] Caniff, 'Production and Distribution', p. 129.

gender, social status and geographical region - also introduced a degree of regulation into the production dynamic. Comic artists were answerable to the representatives at the syndicates that employed them, and the syndicates in turn had to respond to the demands of newspaper editors, who often had strong opinions on the content of the strips. They in turn were concerned with appealing to advertisers and the desires of their readers.

The introduction of syndicates, and the increasing need to make sure strips appealed to a geographically and socially diverse population, introduced a more complex dynamic into the day-to-day production of the strips. Kerry Soper terms the new arrangements a 'call and response between core readers, syndicates, editors, and artists – a back and forth that insured that the cartoonist's work resonated with, or spoke for, its fans'.[161] Broadly speaking, an artist was hired by a syndicate to produce a particular strip. Usually this would be a strip that had already been fully formulated – the artist would pitch the idea to the syndicate who would then accept it and propose a contract. They would agree a schedule of production with the syndicate, who would then approach newspapers across the country, by mail or in person, to try and sell the strips to them. With the exception of NEA, the syndicates sold each strip separately.[162] The artist would then produce the strips, completing both the storylines and the artwork themselves.[163] They

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[161] Soper, 'Performing 'Jiggs': Irish Caricature and Comedic Ambivalence toward Assimilation and the American Dream in George McManus's Bringing Up Father', pp. 173–4.

[162] The Newspaper Enterprise Assocation (NEA) operated a 'blanket' service, meaning that they provided all the strips on their books to newspapers for a flat fee.

[163] By around the late 1930s, with the advent of the adventure strip, it became commonplace for a leading comic artist to hire a team collaborate on a strip's production. Will Eisner, who created *The Spirit*, employed writers to come up with storylines (which he then approved) and other artists to draw many of the pages and do the inking. He oversaw the operation, providing guidance and feedback, but doing very little of the actual work himself. See Ohio State University: Will Eisner Collection, WEE 1/8 Bill Silver Agreements, 'Affadavit'. This was much less common in the production of the funnies. For a short time at the start of his career, Bud Fisher did employ cartoonists to produce comics pages that he was hired to draw for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, where he was paid on a per-page

would provide the syndicate with the finished drawings, usually enough for a few weeks in advance. The drawings were then photographed and engraved, and a mold made using an imprint of the engraving plate. The molds were then distributed to the newspapers who printed the strips, who could make minor amendments (some papers, including the *Salt Lake City Deseret News,* were known to remove cigars and cigarettes if they ever appeared) two or three weeks ahead of publication.[164]
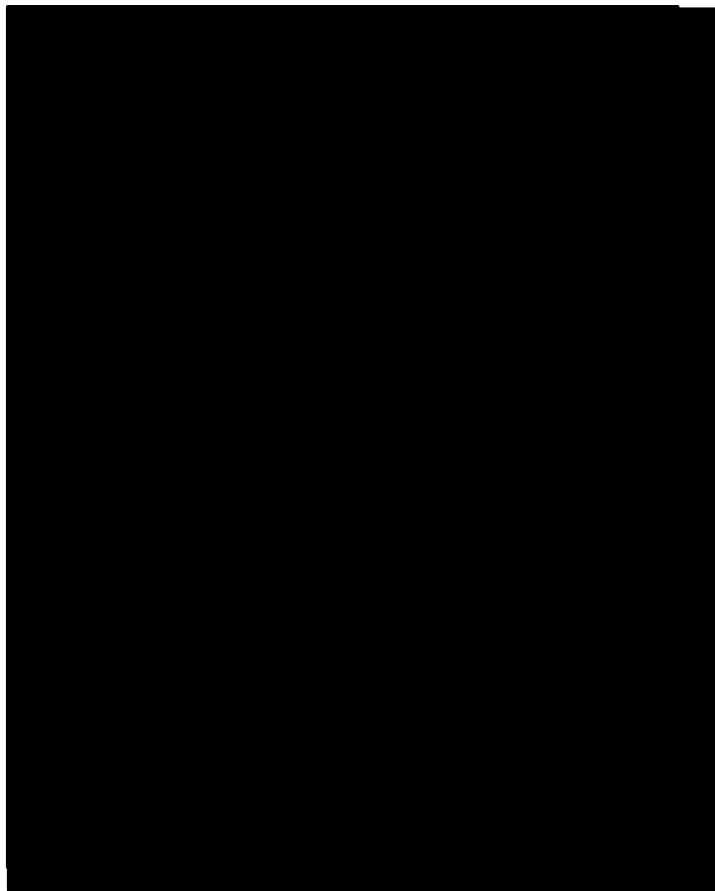
basis. See Bud Fisher, *The Mutt and Jeff Cartoons* (1987). However, with the majority of the funnies, the artist was solely responsible for both the storyline and artwork. If an artist was ill, a strip would often cease to be produced.
[164] Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center: Roy Crane Papers, Box 4, Folder 1, Letter from Bradley Kelly to Roy Crane, 9 September 1943; Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: Larry Harris Collection, 18/7 Syndicate Advertising Information, Allen Saunders, 'The Comics.... are a serious business', August 1945.

Figure 12: Sales pack for NEA (undated) Ohio State University: Toni Mendez Collection

In the early days of the industry, as Verne Greene and Stephen Becker remembered, artists would get a contract to produce a certain number of strips or panels, giving them relative negotiating power upfront.[165] It was certainly perceived (as reported in a 1915 newspaper article) that once an artist submitted a piece to a syndicate, it was 'never tampered with'.[166] However, as the industry grew, the power dynamics between syndicate and artist shifted. Harry Herschfield remembered that one of the representatives at *King Features* did not like it when his artists went into showbusiness. When Herschfield was invited to London to discuss potential opportunities, Brisbane responded by cutting his salary.[167] Both syndicate representatives and newspaper editors increasingly became involved in overseeing the production of the strips. Syndicate representatives – known in the industry as 'the men with the blue pencils' scrutinised every strip submitted, and increasingly sent back the artist's initial drawings with detailed feedback.[168] On occasion, this would include feedback from newspaper editors, who had received their plates and were unhappy with some detail or another, or had spotted an error that had been missed by the comics editor at the syndicate. In these instances, the colour plates might have to be changed, which would mean that either syndicate or newspaper incurred considerable expense.[169]

During the 1930s, as the Depression fuelled competition between rival syndicates, newspaper editors' ultimate power to stop buying a strip meant that they gained the upper hand in these

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[165] Vernon Greene and Stephen Becker, 'National Cartoonist Society Interviews'.
[166] 'Nation's Laughs Profitable to the Comic Artist'.
[167] Harry Herschfield, 'National Cartoonist Society Interviews'.
[168] Ohio State University: Larry Harris Collection, 18/7 Syndicate Advertising Information, Ward Greene, 'The Comics Have Rules of their Own', (undated).
[169] Philip H. Love, Letter, (12 October 1940).

negotiations, with syndicate representatives usually pressing comic artists to act on the feedback provided by the final client.[170] Editors believed that they represented their audiences and were in the best position to stipulate what they would and would not like in a comic strip. They would sometimes include letters from disgruntled readers to support their demands. One such piece of correspondence from the associate Sunday editor at the *Washington Sunday Star* suggested that it would be best if all locations (in this example Portugal had been used) remained nameless, so as to avoid complaints from readers, who tended to take offence as 'seemingly inconsequential things'.[171] However, the restrictions imposed on comic artists by the sensibilities of advertisers, editors and readers by no means rendered their creations devoid of meaning or interest, particularly in the middle years of my study. Indeed, as Chapters 2 and 3 explore in detail, the comic artists operating up to 1935 were able to find a great deal of comedic fodder in the seemingly innocuous humour of the everyday, in which kitchen sink drama was often transformed into sophisticated social satire, effortlessly weaving gag humour and class commentary, and slapstick comedy with observations on race and gender.

The comic artist as social commentator

In 1902, during the early transitional period of the newspaper humour strip, a journalist writing for the black newspaper *The Colored American* expressed his opinions on the power of cartoons. He wrote:

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[170] Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center: Roy Crane Papers, Box 11, Folder 4, Ward Greene, 'Taboos in Comic Strips', undated.
[171] Philip H. Love, Letter, (12 October 1940)..

Cartoons in journalism are far more powerful than many of our journalists seem to think. We wish the Negro press of the country could form a cartoon syndicate and thus be easily able for all Negro papers to furnish an apt cartoon once or twice a month - or once a week - on live questions. These cartoons would serve as eye opener not only to the race, but they would attract the reading public in spite of prejudice and set the whole American people to thinking more deeply than Puck or Judge or Truth.[172]

Given the date, the reference to 'live questions' and the mention of *Puck*, *Judge* and *Truth*, it is likely that this journalist was referring primarily to the power of satirical editorial cartoons – rather than the funny papers – to address and challenge racial thinking.[173] However, his words pointed to the power of all comic artists to reach a reading public in a way that was, perhaps, underestimated by editors and journalists.

There was enormous potential for comic artists to act as social commentators and deliberate shapers of opinion, although the way that this worked changed considerably as the industry developed. In the earliest days of the newspaper funny paper, comic artists' reach was smaller, but their artistic freedom was greater. This meant that, in theory, the funny papers were able to use humour to engage with topical questions, or create characters to either challenge or shore up social stereotypes. As the industry became more regulated and high profile comic artists achieved a larger, national audience, the way in which they could engage with popular discourse shifted. Cartoonists had to heed the guidance of syndicate bosses who urged them to appeal to as

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[172] 'The Power of Cartoons', *The Colored American* (18 January 1902).
[173] All three journals mentioned were longstanding satirical magazines, which – while they included the more modern type of comic strip – had long distributed editorial cartoons.

wide an audience as possible, and avoid offending potential readers. As a result, the subject matter of many strips shifted to depictions of white, middle-class, suburban America, designed to encapsulate a sense of the (racialized) mainstream. The comic artists producing these strips, whether deliberately or not, became important creators of social discourse, using humour to reinforce social norms and set the boundaries of normativity and otherness. Understanding who these people were provides some insight into the extent to which white, educated, middle-class men dominated the industry and, by extension, influenced the portrayal of American life in the strips.

Female comic artists

While the early comics industry was undoubtedly dominated by white men, there were a number of female comic artists and writers operating in this period. Using Allan Holtz's list of comic artists as a starting point, identifying names that could have been female and cross-referencing with the strips they were credited for suggests that between 1900 and 1935, perhaps 90 women contributed to the production of comic strips in the United States. A few worked in the earliest years of syndication – around 15 women were credited on strips produced before 1910. That number increased to around 30 between 1910 and 1920, and an additional 40 after 1920. The figure for the middle period is inflated by the large number of women credited on a month long series produced in 1915 entitled *Getting Ahead as a Business Girl*, in which each comic purportedly featured a success story by the author, who was named as the creator. Realistically Holtz believes that it was more likely that all the comics in the series were produced by one or two women (he names Betty Vincent and Hazel Conklin as likely suspects). If the numbers are adjusted to factor in this observation, only around 20 women produced strips first produced in

the middle years, demonstrating a clear and abrupt increase in the 1920s. These numbers are estimates only, and may include a few men with gender neutral names. The lack of further references to most of these people in academic texts or on the internet means it is impossible to check every single one.

The vast majority of these women were the creators of small and largely forgotten comics with short run times, but the period did see one female cartoonist rise to fame. Edwina Dumm took a correspondence course in cartooning at the Langdon School in Cleveland after she graduated from high school, and upon completion gained a job as a staff artist at the *Daily Monitor* newspaper in Columbus, Ohio. She began publishing editorial cartoons for the paper in 1915. When it ceased production in 1917, she moved to New York and approached George Matthew Adams (of the George Matthew Adams syndicate). She pitched an idea of a humour strip featuring a little girl and her dog to him. It was accepted as a weekday strip, but the girl was changed to a boy and the strip became the long-lasting and very popular *Cap Stubbs 'n' Tippie*, first published in papers in 1918. Stubbs also created *Alec the Great* and *Sinbad*, both of which were successful and enjoyed long periods of syndication.[174] Despite Stubbs' success, the early comics industry was clearly a man's business. Female input was limited to strips clearly covering 'women's topics' like romance, child-rearing and domestic management. The mainstream humour strips about 'everyday life' perpetuated a worldview which, while it featured many female characters, was ultimately created and distributed by men.

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[174] 'Biography of Edwina Dumm', (14 February 2019).

White ethnic and black cartoonists

While it was reasonably easy to identify women comic artists, determining how many cartoonists came from immigrant families is much harder to do. There were some high profile white ethnic creators of well-known comics. Four of the strips in this study were created by immigrants: George McManus (*Bringing Up Father*) was second-generation Irish, Harry Hershfield (*Abie the Agent*) the son of Jewish immigrants, Frederick Burr-Opper (*Happy Hooligan*) was of Austrian descent and the artists of both iterations of *The Katzenjammer Kids* were German; Rudolph Dirks moved to America when he was seven, and Hardold Knerr's father was a German physician who had migrated to the United States before Knerr's birth. Further well-known ethnic cartoonists included Nicholas Afonsky (Russian-born, who worked on *Little Orphan Annie* for King Features in the 1920s and 1930s), Al Capp (a second-generation Jew who created *Li'l Abner* in 1934), Charles W. Kahles (born in Germany, and created *Hairbreadth Harry* as well as working on over 20 other strips in his lifetime and Otto Messmer (the son of German immigrants, and creator of *Felix the Cat*).[175] However, the vast majority of comic artists were either native New Yorkers or, as was observed in a 1915 article on the rise of this new career type, based in the Midwest.[176] A disproportionate number of comic artists in this period seem to have been born and raised in Illinois, Iowa and Ohio.

Black comic artists were completely absent from the mainstream industry during this period, with one exception. George Herriman, who created the strip *Krazy Kat* (which, despite a fairly limited following when it was in publication has gained almost cult status among comic fans

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[175] Goulart, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, pp. 4; 65; 258.
[176] 'Nation's Laughs Profitable to the Comic Artist'.

since) was mixed race. For the majority of his life, nobody queried Herriman's racial status, assuming him to be white. Many years after his death however, an article published in the *San Francisco Sunday Examiner* by a researcher called Arthur Berger claimed that a note he found made by the New Orleans Health Department at the time of Herriman's birth proved the comic artist was black. A few years later, further research determined that Herriman was likely to have had both white and black ancestry, and he is usually still cited as the first noteworthy black comic artist in America.[177] Regardless, during his career he did not publicise his racial identity. He often covered his hair with a hat, especially in publicity photographs. As Michael Tisserand notes in a biography of Herriman, this behaviour was likely a deliberate strategy to conceal his background, as the institutionally racist structures of the American newspaper industry forced him to 'pass' as white to continue in his chosen career. At the time that Herriman was working for the Hearst newspapers in 1907, several stories were printed in those same papers about light-skinned individuals who had been 'passing as white' but whose secrets had been uncovered, resulting in their removal from sororities and loss of careers.[178] The Herriman family had been 'passing' for many years, since they had moved to Los Angeles in George's youth. His parents had owned slaves. He had socialized with whites from an early age, gone to college and married a white woman. Had the designation of 'colored' on his birth certificate been discovered during his life, the results would likely have been personally and professionally catastrophic.[179]

While Krazy Kat, his most famous creation, was deliberately non-gender specific, any engagement with race issues in his work was subtle – not least due to the fact that Krazy was a

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[177] 'Biography of George Herriman'.
[178] Michael Tisserand, *Krazy: George Herriman, a Life in Black and White* (New York, 2016).
[179] Ibid.

(black) feline rather than a person. All the other creatures in Krazy's world were also black in colour. Sarah Boxter argues that 'Krazy is black in all ways' – not just literally as a black cat, but ethnically as a black character. She points to a poignant 1935 episode of the strip in which Krazy (whom he designates as female in this instance) goes to a beauty salon and emerges white from head to toe. As a result of this transformation, Ignatz (the mouse sidekick in the strip) falls in love with Krazy, who he does not recognize until she drops her monogrammed handkerchief and Ignatz disappears off for a brick to throw at her.[180] Boxter reads much into this exchange – and the initials KK on the handkerchief – suggesting that in it Herriman was 'declaring skin color irrelevant to identity and suggesting that those who don't agree might want to join the Klan'.[181]

While black readers may have picked up on the possible racial meaning in this one exchange between Krazy and Ignatiz, it seems unlikely that the strip – taken in its entirety – had any particular influence on the way its readers thought about race and identity. Biographers of Herriman agree that his status as a white man was never questioned during his lifetime, something that is borne out by a search of the Library of Congress's newspaper database in the period 1930-1935: there was not a single result when searching for references to either Krazy Kat or Herriman himself including the keywords 'Colored', 'negro', 'black', 'African' or 'Creole'. Indeed, even using the search term 'race' in conjunction with their names brings back only two results, both referring to an auto race in which Krazy took part. In fact, without any indication from Herriman himself as to his intentions for his feline character, and particularly given his deliberate and consistent efforts to hide his racial background, it is very difficult to

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[180] Sarah Boxter, 'George Herriman: The Cat in the Hat', in Ben Scwartz, ed., *The Best American Comics Criticism* (Seattle, 2010), p. 149.
[181] Ibid., p. 149.

argue that *Krazy Kat* is an example of a 'black' comic. Any possible racial meanings were so carefully coded that the vast majority of the audience would likely have missed them. Furthermore, the comic's animal characters and abstract social settings – as well as its relatively small following when it was in publication – suggest Herriman's impact as a social commentator would have been extremely limited. Ultimately, the comics industry in this early period was dominated by white men, some of immigrant background, and it was therefore their vision of American life that found form on the comic page.

Comic strips and social responsibility

As the syndicates began operations in the opening decades of the twentieth century, there were not yet hard-and-fast rules or expectations guiding the industry. This relatively relaxed approach to strips in the early years gave comic artists an amount of creative license in their ideas that would be more restricted later on. Second-generation Jew Harry Herschfield, who created *Abie the Agent* in 1913, had often used Yiddish sayings in an earlier strip (*Desperate Desmond)*, liking to think he was pleasing some of his Jewish friends by doing so. He felt, however, that this did not go far enough in representing the New York Jewish community of which he was a part. He wanted to give them a 'representative cartoonist' and to create in Abe Kabibble (the protagonist) a sympathetic Jewish character, a 'clean-cut-well-dressed specimen of Jewish humor' that would counter the uncomplimentary Jewish stereotypes of vaudeville and Burlesque.[182] It appears that Herschfield achieved his goal; according to theatrical producer Al Woods, the installation of "Abie the Agent" into the Hearst newspapers and other syndicates,

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[182] Lawrence E. Mintz, 'Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque', *MELUS*, 21 (Winter 1996), p. 21.

throughout the United States 'almost completely changed the tenor of Hebrew character on the stage'.[183]

There were concerns initially among the editors of the Hearst papers that advertising revenues would drop if they included the strip. Interestingly, they were concerned not that the strip would put off mainstream American readers (and thus advertisers), but that Jewish clientele, who made up a significant portion of their New York audience, might take offence at a strip that relied on Jewish humour. Arthur Brisbane, editor of the *New York Journal* and one of William Randolph Hearst's close friends, believed that the Jewish population's very liberal sense of humour would mean they 'could handle it', reasoning that Herschfield was unlikely to insult his own community.[184] *Abie* never commanded quite the same geographical reach as the other strips in the study (see figure 11 above), but by 1921 was thought to be read by 20 million Americans every day, suggesting that Brisbane was right to take the risk.[185] Herschfield himself commented that he felt an enormous sense of responsibility to his public, and saw the strip as standing for a 'high purpose'. He fulfilled his desire to create a strip with an overt social purpose, his relative creative freedom enabling him to actively further the cause of a specific ethnic group, using humour to integrate 'certain types of Jews' into the broader American cultural marketplace.[186] This artistic license would not last, incompatible as it was with the broader goal of the strips to attract both readers and advertisers. Indeed, in later years it was not feasible for comic features to carry too much of the philosophy of its writer, artist or distributor, as this would offend readers

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[183] 'An Exclusive Interview for The Jewish Monitor From Harry Hershfield, Creator of 'Abie The Agent'', *The Jewish Monitor* (3 June 1921).
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.

and put off potential advertisers. Such was the case in the *Chicago Tribune* Syndicate's *Little Orphan Annie*, which encountered criticism when it began to 'preach too fragrantly the *Tribune's* anti-union labor and anti-politician-propaganda'.[187] Herschfield's experience with *Abie the Agent* clearly demonstrates that in the early days at least, it was possible for comic artists to enjoy some creative license with their material. They could move use their strips to actively put forward a specific idea, and engage with racial stereotypes to a certain degree, so long as their doing so did not overtly challenge the sensibilities of any potential audience group.

Herschfield seems to have been fairly unique among his colleagues in his desire to make a moral point with his strip. In 1944, Sidonic Greenberg wrote that 'at the start, the comics were 'amusing toys', with 'no social responsibility and no ambition to become a social force; they merely reached out for the largest possible market'.[188] The majority aimed solely to create a product that would make readers laugh, and as such, be attractive to editors, who wished to improve their circulation figures. The creators of two of the strips in this study made public comment on their motivations for drawing their strips. George McManus, who created *Bringing Up Father,* and Harry Tuthill, who created *The Bungle Family* (originally titled *Home Sweet Home*) both maintained that their primary motivation was humour. As McManus, whose strip relies very heavily on Irish Lace Curtain satire, put it, 'it has always been my contention that a comic strip should primarily be funny. The average reader finds enough in our newspapers to be sad about'.[189] Tuthill tells of the 'accidental creation' of the Bungles, explaining in a 1930

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187 Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America*, p. 600.
188 Syracuse University Library, Special Collections Research Center: Roy Crane Papers, Box 11, Folder 4, Sidonic Gruenberg, 'The Comics as a Social Force', December 1944'.
189 'George McManus, Famous Creator of Jiggs, Replies to Criticism of Cartoon Comics', *Xenia Gazette* (2 June 1926).

interview, that he pitched several ideas to the *Washington Post Dispatch* and they chose that one. His characters, he said, represented social types rather than being based on real people.[190]

Even if comic artists were not, as Albert Boime believed, 'unreserved moralists' trying to make a social or political point with their strips, their construction of social types played a significant role in the definition of social norms in the period.[191] The seemingly silly joke cartoons may not have seemed overtly political and did not editorialise or provide explicit commentary on current affairs. But the decisions that the artists made on how they portrayed their characters were significant, as they drew boundaries around what was considered to be normal and acceptable behaviour. The very nature of the comics that appeared on the funny pages makes them all the more effective in their role as a social force. They created humorous scenarios that were relatable to the lives of their readers, with the best strips including a subtle element of social satire.[192] Unlike the adventure and fantasy strips that would come to dominate in the 1930s, the funny papers were focused on the little details of everyday life. As one commentator put it in 1916:

> Human beings first think of themselves. They can't help it. They are built that way. In this fact is found the reasons why the modern newspaper comic strip is more popular than cartoons of public men or events. The newspaper comic, such as Bud and Goldberg draw, is about you and me. The newspaper comic maker, either instinctively or by design, has discovered this truth. So, instead of giving us a picture of Wilson or Roosevelt, he gives us a picture of a comical happening right in our own home or our own office. There in the

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[190] 'Harry Tuthill', *St Louis Post Dispatch* (22 July 1930).
[191] Albert Boime, 'The Comic Stripped and Ash Canned: a Review', *Art Journal*, 32 (Autumn 1972), p. 22.
[192] Greene and Becker, 'National Cartoonist Society Interviews'.

picture is you – and there am I – and over there is that bonehead that we know, who acts just that way. We have seen him do that a thousand times. Oh, what an idiot he is![193]

By focusing on the everyday, on 'normal' families living normal lives, comic artists, whether deliberately or not, played a part in defining what 'normal' was. They both reflected and reinforced social conventions, with jokes often focusing on social transgressions or faux pas. In doing so, comic artists both reflected their audience's tastes and attitudes, and helped to shape them.

Cleaning up the comics

The comics industry took a strong stance on the matter of how its artists dealt with controversial issues comparatively early on. Early cartoonists like Richard Outcault (*The Yellow Kid*) operating in the 'experimentation period' around the turn of the century were able to satirize – or even just poke fun at – religious and ethnic groups and even use their strips to provide a commentary on political issues.[194] However, the initial trend of creating strips that connected with working class and immigrant audiences was countered in the teens by the shift toward targeting a national audience through syndication.[195] As circulation widened in the 1910s, there was a concerted attempt to 'clean up' the comics, and target middle class audiences across the

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[193] 'Maker of Comics gets $150,000'.
[194] Johnson, 'US Comics'; Boime, 'The Comic Stripped and Ash Canned: a Review', p. 22.
[195] Kerry Soper, 'Performing "Jiggs": Irish Caricature and Comedic Ambivalence toward Assimilation and the American Dream in George McManus's Bringing Up Father', *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 4 (April 2005), p. 183.

country.[196] These efforts focused particularly on ethnic humour, which, according to cartoonist Vern Greene, went out of fashion after around 1910 as assimilation efforts really sped up.[197] While some specialist periodicals featuring cartoons, such as *Puck*, still used their pages to criticise mass immigration and undermine particular ethnic groups (as Elsa Nystrom has shown, they were particularly critical of the Chinese and Irish), the comic syndicates were pioneers in their efforts to create a racially neutral and inclusive popular discourse, something that it would take other industries decades to catch up with.[198]

By the 1940s, the taboos that comic artists were expected to respect in their work were not restricted to matters of race. Indeed, a list compiled by Roy Crane of the taboos in comic strips according to Ward Greene contained no fewer than eleven items, setting out the boundaries of what was not considered to be acceptable subject matter.[199] These were:

> No religion or politics
>
> No profane, brutal, horrible, indecent
>
> No cruelty to women, children or animals
>
> No divorce (tried once, never again)
>
> No drinking (Okay Suds and corn squeezin's)
>
> No offenses to either races or groups
>
> No snakes (Segar tried Popeye fighting funny Boa, no go)

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[196] Ibid., p. 182.
[197] Greene and Becker, 'National Cartoonist Society Interviews'.
[198] Nystrom, 'A Rejection of Order', p. 74.
[199] Ward Greene, 'Taboos in Comic Strips', undated.

Crime does not pay (Even Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn were changed for comics)

No cussing

Comics change – no more brick throwing

Names of people and places cause much comment

Crane's notes also made mention of the fact that the speech of the comics was the speech of America, and that as they were read by everyone, they needed to please – or at least not offend – everyone. A 1945 article by Allen Saunders expanded on this list, citing "Japs" as the only racial group it was acceptable to offend, and adding living celebrities, the 4th of July (in deference to Canadian readers) and sex to the list of editorial taboos to be observed. Saunders explained that comic writers were 'unanimous in their insistence on good taste in the preparation of comic strip continuity. They recognise and avoid a wider list of editorial taboos than perhaps any other type of professional storyteller'. While these two documents were written in the forties, it seems likely that the taboos themselves evolved in the preceding decades. Indeed, a 1925 article in the *Hamilton Evening Journal* made mention of that fact that 'nowadays, when a comic artist joins a syndicate and lays plans for a new feature, the syndicate manager is sure to tell him to put a pretty girl in, but this wasn't always the case. It used to be that girls in comics were taboo, except as the wives of characters'.[200] The evidence available suggests that from the 1910s through the 1940s, newspaper syndicates worked hard to rid the comics of any material that could cause offence to any sector of the population, changing these standards based on their perception of the current public mood. Because comic artists were required to depict mainstream, middle America

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[200] ''Polly and Her Pals' Truly American Feature', *Hamilton Evening Journal* (21 November 1925).

in a way that would resonate with as wide a sector of their diverse readership as possible, they were, whether deliberately or not, important actors in the creation, and communication, of the idea of the 'American Way' that would gain such public fascination in the 1930s.

The implementation of 'taboos' was not unique to the comics in this period, but the extensiveness of their purview was. Memoirs of stage actors from the period recollect the clamping down on 'blue' material by local theater managers, who would edit the content of stage shows between the first matinee and evening performance.[201] Some of these restrictions were general – one star recalled that you were not to say 'slob', 'son of a gun' or 'hully gee' on the stage ('hully gee' was a slang abbreviation of Holy Jesus) for fear of causing audiences offence.[202] However, more often than not, the restrictions were made according to local sensibilities, meaning that shows that toured the country were continually amended to suit the local sense of humour. They were not subject to the same degree of standardisation that would come to characterise the comics industry, with vaudeville shows continuing to centre on political topics like immigration, and social problems like temperance.[203] Though stage expression of ethnic humour faded after 1910, declining with vaudeville and burlesque in the 1920s, it survived (and, as argued by Lawrence Mintz, even thrived) for many decades longer in Broadway revues and stand-up comedy.[204]

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[201] Sophie Tucker, *Some of These Days: The Autobiography of Sophie Tucker.* (Hammond, 2013), p. 149.
[202] Charles Samuels and Louise Samuels, *Once upon a Stage: The Merry World of Vaudeville* (New York, 1974), p. 89.
[203] https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/vshtml/vsforms.html#var [accessed 1st August 2016].
[204] Mintz, 'Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque', p. 20.

The comics industry was also one of the first in the mass media to consciously try and tackle the use of overt racial and ethnic stereotypes, though this process did not begin in earnest until the 1940s. Hollywood in particular continued to utilise both ethnic humour and overt racism in movies long after it was deemed unacceptable in the comics. Films utilising well-worn racial stereotypes (according to Donald Bogle these were: 'coons', 'pure coons', the 'pickaninny', the 'Uncle Remus') dominated Hollywood for the first half of the twentieth century, and movies depicting the halcyon days of the antebellum south – including slavery – were consistently popular.[205] Radio, which borrowed heavily from earlier forms like vaudeville, also relied heavily on ethnic humour. Dialect comedy (in which humour was derived from the misunderstanding or mispronunciation of words in a foreign accent) like that of Weber and Fields was very popular, even appearing in the inaugural broadcast of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in 1926.[206] While the awareness of the 'invisible audience' did require radio comics to considerably tone down the racial humour it borrowed from the stage, it did not lose it entirely. The *Amos n Andy* program, which had its roots in American minstrel shows, continued to perpetuate black stereotypes even as it attempted to appeal to an African American audience.[207]

Sadly, there are very few records left on the subject of the comics syndicates' taboos dating before the late 1930s, beyond the recollections of comic artists and contemporaries. As a result, historical treatment of the subject has been vague at best, with Albert Boime's short 1972 essay 'The Comic Stripped and Ash Canned: a Review', published in the *Art Journal*, the most in

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[205] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York, 2001), p. 4.
[206] Nancy A. Walker, *What's So Funny?: Humor in American Culture* (Wilmington, 1998), p. 46.
[207] Ibid., p. 47.

depth account. He argues that in the course of the comic strip's evolution, the artists became limited by their effectiveness in increasing newspaper circulation. The expansion of circulation led to a proportionate increase in the number of restrictions imposed on the artists by their syndicate bosses. Trying to reach as wide an audience as possible, the syndicates forced comic strippers to adhere to 'innumerable taboos'.[208] Strangely, the most thorough study written on the early syndicates, a PhD thesis completed in 1989 for the University of Chicago, asserted that while 'certain conventions' were observed in the comic supplement, strips 'never developed a censorship code like that later used in the motion picture industry… generally what was acceptable behaviour in the lower levels of American society was also acceptable in the comics'.[209] Nystrom, also asserts that racial humour did not become controversial in the comics until the 1950s, something that is clearly not borne out by the documentary evidence from the 1930s and 1940s.[210]

Indeed, by the 1940s, the comic industry had embraced a complex and thorough set of standards that governed what was allowable and what was not, with comic artists expected to adhere to these rules. It seems likely that this developed over the course of the previous decades, building on the general desire, mentioned in interviews with Steve Becker and Verne Greene, to 'clean up' the comics and remove any content that could be deemed as offensive or tawdry by any section of the nation's readership. By the 1940s, this included the use of black stereotypes in comics (something which was commonplace in the strips up to the 1930s). In 1943, comic artist

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[208] Boime, 'The Comic Stripped and Ash Canned: a Review', p. 22.
[209] Nystrom, 'A Rejection of Order', pp. 168–9.
[210] Ibid., p. 271.

Roy Crane received a letter from the General Editor at *King Features*, providing guidance on featuring black characters in his comic Buz Sawyer. Greene wrote:

> In the background of a couple of daily releases you have a colored character. One is a Pullman porter and the other is a waiter. We feel you may be inviting trouble if you use colored characters in the comic at this time. Experience has shown us that we have to be awfully careful about any comics in which negroes appear. The Association for the Advancement of Colored People protests every time they see anything which they consider ridicules the negro no matter how faintly. For example, Swanson did a little drawing of a negro baseball team breaking up to chase a chicken across the diamond. As a result, papers in cities like Pittsburgh and Chicago were threatened with action by local negro organisations. The two negroes you draw are no more caricatured than some whites in your comic, but they are caricatured just enough to give some colored brother the chance to accuse Roy Crane of lampooning his race.[211]

Greene's letter was certainly not pressing Crane on the importance of taking a moral high ground, or suggesting that he himself had any problem with the way Crane portrayed African Americans in the strip. Indeed, the letter is derogatory in tone towards the NAACP's complaints, suggesting that they were over-reacting to the presence of the black service characters. However, it does demonstrate that by the 1940s industry executives sought to avoid drawing criticism from groups like the NAACP by ensuring that artists like Crane refrained from including black

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[211] Syracuse University Libraries Special Collections Research Center, Roy Crane Papers, Box 4, Folder 1, Letter from Ward Greene to Roy Crane, 7 October 1943.

characters where possible. Rather than seek to address the position of African Americans in society, and depict them in more rounded roles on the comics pages, the industry chose to ignore them completely, seeking to ensure that the America presented on the comics page was a white one, representing and not challenging the ubiquitous racism entrenched within mainstream values.[212]

Conclusion: the comic strip and the dissemination of cultural messages

Studying the evolution of the comic strip or funny paper provides valuable insight into the wider story of the role played by print culture in the development of a collective American identity and the consolidation of social norms. Certainly, the strips are a useful source for understanding society's 'tastes and mores', and assessing the popularity of different products and styles. But more than that, the combination of images and words also makes them a unique source for studying the development of language and the introduction and popularisation of new words and phrases. They also reflected and shaped social conventions, helping to perpetuate a discourse of American normativity. The fact that such strict measures were put in place to limit the diversity that could reasonably be represented in the strips so as not to cause offence to any potential audience group across the country makes them even more fascinating as a source, as their portrayal of 'appropriate' behaviour represents the most careful interpretation of popular

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[212] According to Thomas Cripps, it was around this point that the NAACP began to make real gains in the film industry, working with heads of major studios to codify some social changes and procedures, intended to abandon pejorative racial roles, place blacks in positions as extras they could reasonably be expected to occupy in society. See Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (Oxford ; New York, 1977), p. 3.

humour, an effort to represent a unified vision of America at a time when the public mood over questions of race, national identity and class structure was far from certain.

The fact that comics gained an international audience so soon after being syndicated meant that they also played a part in creating an image of America in other countries. *Bringing Up Father* appeared in England as early as 1916.[213] In 1927, a newspaper article in the *Anderson Herald* commented that it was now so widespread across the globe that it was being printed off a press somewhere in the world every half an hour.[214] By 1934, McManus' characters were appearing in 71 countries, with a readership estimated at over 100,000,000.[215] As Milt Caniff recalled, the fact that material was distributed in other countries meant that comic artists had to be even more careful not to cause offence in their portrayal of specific groups or places.[216] The role of Hollywood in the cultural 'colonization' of Europe after World War One has been thoroughly documented, with historians like Frank Costigliola highlighting the part that movies played not only in popularising an image of America, but also in shaping the development of the national character of the countries they were received in.[217] European commentators feared that Hollywood movies threatened independent national identity, with films spreading the American way of life on an unsuspecting European public.[218]

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[213] I found an appearance in the *London Evening News* on 12 January 1916 – there may of course have been earlier instances of the strip appearing.
[214] ''Bringing up Father' Is World-Acclaimed Humor Masterpiece', *Anderson Herald* (18 August 1927).
[215] 'Comics and Their Creators', *The Literary Digest* (24 March 1934).
[216] Caniff, 'Production and Distribution', p. 135.
[217] Frank Costigliola, 'The Americanization of Europe in the 1920s', in Frank Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion: American Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations with Europe, 1919-1933* (Ithica), pp. 176–177.
[218] Ibid., p. 177.

If movies had such a profound influence on affecting their audiences' perception of their own national identities, inside and outside the States, we must assume that comics could – and did – also have a profound role in selling the idea of America to their readers. The funny papers' portrayal of American life is significant not only for what it can tell historians about popular tastes, customs and opinions, but also because the comics themselves helped to shape these ideas in their readers. The following two chapters investigate the complex way that comic artists engaged with discourse on social status, race and gender, with the strips providing a cultural site in which humour could be used to variably shore up, undermine or challenge social conventions. Indeed, humour can be used to articulate the actions or attributes a society deems to be inferior, and can therefore be a powerful means of reinforcing hegemonic cultural standards. When this humour is as widely accessed as were the comics, it can play a significant part in defining the very nature of a nation's culture. Elsa Nystrom has demonstrated from reading newspapers and magazines in the period that from around 1820 there were some signs that an identifiable sense of American identity had begun to develop in the cities and towns.[219] Certain values, such as patriotism, chauvinism, belief in God, a rudimentary Calvinistic moral code, rugged individualism and the separation of spheres, were espoused as inherently American in print culture.[220] The assumption of editors in the nineteenth century was that the majority of readers fell into this mould, coming from either the upper echelons of society or the middle classes of farmers and housewives.[221] Things were very different a century later. In 1910, one seventh of the American population was foreign born (in the industrial East, the figure was closer to

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[219] Nystrom, 'A Rejection of Order', pp. 11–12.
[220] Ibid., pp. 11–12.
[221] Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America's Coming-Of-Age with the Press* (New York, 1995), p. 203.

half).[222] Reformers were desperate to solve the 'problem' of how to make these new immigrants into Americans, seeking, as Michael McGerr put it, to remake the nation's 'polyglot population in their own middle class image'.[223] As influential disseminators of cultural messages, the way that the comics treated questions on class, race and American identity was therefore extremely important. As chapters 2 and 3 examine, the second generation strips in particular had an integral role in the construction of social norms, in particular the definition of the white middle-class mainstream that represented advertisers' (and therefore the comics') target audience.

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[222] Emery, Emery, and Roberts, *The Press and America*, p. 210.
[223] M. E. MacGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870 - 1920* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2005) p. xiv.

Chapter 2: Ambivalence and the American Dream: Class, Gender & Social Identity in the Comics
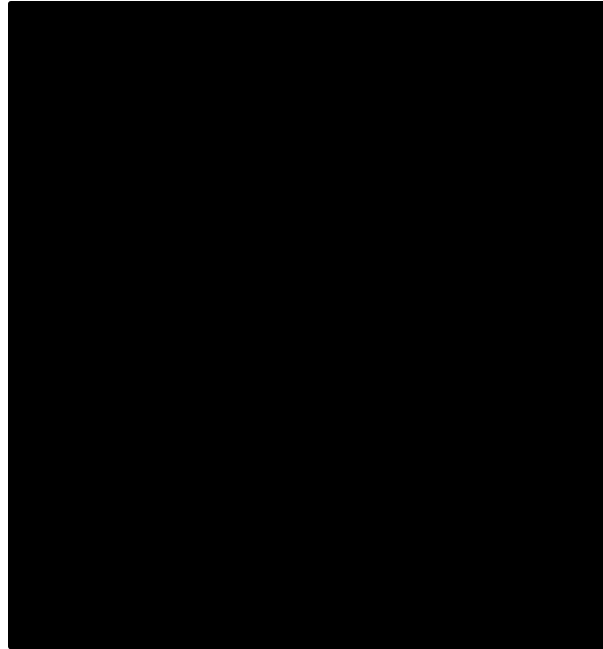
Figure 10: Walt Wallet considers his class status. *Philadelphia Evening Ledger*, 23 February 1920.

In the single-panel strip pictured above, *Gasoline Alley's* Walt Wallet pondered a question that has preoccupied many historians: how to define class in America, and how people ordinary people understood their position in the social hierarchies of an industrialised consumer society. Where Hearst and Pulitzer had used the earliest comic strips as a means of attracting illiterate, working-class and immigrant readers, and thus gaining a competitive edge in their battle to monopolise the New York market, by the 1910s the appeal and utility of the comic supplement was much broader. By 1920, when this particular strip was published, national distribution of the comics had firmly taken hold, meaning that the syndicates favoured strips that would have a broad appeal across the social spectrum. Some historians have described this shift in class terms,

suggesting that while 'old working class favourites' like *Mutt and Jeff* and *Happy Hooligan* were retained by the syndicates, priority was given to new suburban family strips that were aimed at the middle classes.[1] Furthermore, some have argued that as the newer comics were designed to appeal to the sensibilities of an increasingly middle-class audience, the subversiveness and depth of their humour decreased as they included blander fare that was less likely to cause offence to readers.[2] This narrative seems to fit into a wider interpretation of the homogenizing, standardizing function of mass culture.

However, this interpretation vastly oversimplifies the function of the later comics, which often parodied the very concept of white mainstream, middle-class America. While there is no denying the fact that in the second decade of the twentieth century a new genre of suburban family comic came to dominate the comics industry, it is too simplistic to argue that this resulted in a 'dumbing down' of the comics' subject matter. Rather, the strips in this study – taken as a collection and examined across the entire period 1900-1935 – indicate an intense preoccupation with questions of gender, class, social status and social anxiety, with comic artists using the strips to construct 'humorous parables that pointed readers toward appropriate behaviours'.[3] The strips clearly distinguish between the elite, middle and working classes, and while the introduction of suburban strips through the 1910s (and a noticeable shift in the storylines of pre-existing strips) demonstrates an appetite for 'kitchen sink' humour, their content did not lack social meaning. In

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[1] Elsa Ann Nystrom, 'A Rejection of Order, the Development of the Newspaper Comic Strip in America, 1830-1920', Ph.D. thesis (University of Chicago 1989); Kerry Soper, 'Performing "Jiggs": Irish Caricature and Comedic Ambivalence toward Assimilation and the American Dream in George McManus's Bringing Up Father', *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 4 (April 2005), pp. 173–213.
[2] Pierre Coupiere and Maurice C. Horn, *A History of the Comic Strip* (New York, 1968), p. 45.
[3] David Welky, *Everything Was Better in America: Print Culture in the Great Depression* (University of Illinois Press, 2010), p. 69.

fact, the strips suggest - both in their portrayal of mainstream culture and in the subversion and incongruity used to construct punchlines - an overwhelming preoccupation with the dual themes of social mobility and status anxiety. Most notably, the comics across the sample display an undercurrent of ambivalence towards the idea of the American Dream, serving to at times reinforce, and at other times challenge, its place in the American national identity.

Those historians that have considered the treatment of class in the comics have reached a variety of conclusions. David Welky, in a wider study of American print culture during the Depression, argued that *The Gumps* (one of the strips in this study) 'drew deeply from the same matrix of [conservative] values seen in other mainstream print sources. It cast the well-off as society's proper leaders, promoted hard work and individual initiative, and equated the family with social order'.[4] Kerry Soper wrote (without citing any specific evidence) of the attempts by syndicates in the 1910s and 1920s to ensure that the ideological content of the strips matched the interests and needs of the professional middle-class audiences that were the primary target of the medium by this point.[5] Soper does acknowledge that many strips were 'richly conflicted in both their codings and potential readings', with their creators alternately mocking ghetto dwellers and high society types.[6] Conversely, Jill Kasen studied a selection of comics published in *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* from 1925-1975, and concluded that in the earlier period, the idea of financial reward and social status earned through entrepreneurialism dominated the strips; the centrality of the rags to riches idiom meant that the middle class comprised only a small stratum

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[4] Ibid, p. 69.
[5] Kerry Soper, 'From Swarthy Ape to Sympathetic Everyman and Subversive Trickster: The Development of Irish Caricature in American Comic Strips between 1890 and 1920', *Journal of American Studies*, 39 (2005), p. 273.
[6] Ibid., pp. 273–282.

of society in the comics. By contrast, after World War Two, she argued, 'the middle class encompassed virtually all of society – and served as a collective symbol'.[7] These three historians all studied different comics, and of course the variations in their interpretations could be simply due to differences in their source base. But even single comics are subject to a variety of interpretations, and rarely offer a single or straightforward ideological message, particularly when read across several years. As a collective, the strips in this study provide useful insights into the myriad and complex ways that the concepts of class, social status and national identity were dissected, expressed and understood in this period.

Even when the cartoons are seen as a contested space in which multiple different ideologies found form, certain patterns did emerge in the way that the different comics in this sample treated questions around class and American identity. While no single ideological stance existed across all the strips, there were some broad areas of similarity. Most notably, the trope of the American Dream was re-imagined on the comic page. This idea – of the promise of upward mobility and success earned through effort – has been a crucial component of American national identity since the Pilgrims, and has (as Jim Cullen has shown) achieved a degree of cultural omnipresence throughout American history, as an idea that was adaptable to a variety of historical situations. While the term did not come into wide usage until the late 1920s, Cullen argues that its essence was understood long before, and was inextricably linked with Americans' definition of their national culture.[8]

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[7] Jill Kasen, 'Whither the Self-Made Man? Comic Culture and the Crisis of Legitimation in the United States', *Social Problems*, 28 (December 1980), p. 134.
[8] Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (New York, 2004), p. 5.

Central to the American Dream idea as it was expressed in the early twentieth century was the belief that individuals from any background could succeed and progress socially, as America was 'a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement'.[9] For many, this belief was understood in economic terms, with success defined in material terms. Integral to the idea of the American Dream is the existence of an open class structure, with social mobility defined by the success of a person's actions and unhampered by their background. This notion offered a particularly powerful promise to immigrants arriving in the United States in the early 1900s. As Jewish immigrant Norma Marx recalled, 'In Mama's shtetl, America was called the land where gold and silver lined the streets. Anybody who worked hard, they said, could become rich.'[10] The country's relative economic prosperity in the period – especially during the real estate and stock market booms of the 'roaring twenties' – seemed to support the promise of the Dream and the idea of America as a land of opportunity for all those willing to take it. Of course for most, the reality was very different and a lack of gainful employment and entrenched social inequality rendered the American Dream an impossible one. Widespread dissatisfaction with the unfulfilled promise of the American Dream was a common theme of popular culture in the 1940s.[11]

Seemingly at odds with the popular interpretation of the concept, in its early usage, the terminology of the American Dream was also applied to Progressive-Era concerns around monopoly and the unequal distribution of wealth. Sarah Churchwell has traced the appearance of

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[9] James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (London, 1931), p. 374.

[10] Norma Marx, *Stories of Jerusalem, Israel and Other Loves* (Bloomington, 2013), p. 102.

[11] See in particular Hayley Mitchell Haugen, *The American Dream in John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men* (Michigan, 2010); Bob Batchelor, *American Pop: Popular Culture Decade by Decade* (London, 2008), p. 195; Joseph L. DeVitis and John Martin Rich, *The Success Ethic, Education, and the American Dream* (New York, 1996), p. 5.

the term 'American Dream' in the press, and argues that during the Progressive Era the usage of the term related to a sense of moral disquiet, reflecting the fear that America was losing its way.[12] She sees the phrase as a reminder of the country's shared founding values and the notion of equal opportunity for all – rather than the individual prosperity of a select few. For Churchwell, individuals who personified the extreme version of the rags-to-riches idea – self-made millionaires for example – represented a threat to the wider promise of the American Dream, in which a broad section of the American people could achieve modest success and what was often termed a 'middle-class' lifestyle.

The comics reflected the inherent conflicts of the idea of the American Dream. They portrayed a large and accessible American middle class whose existence reinforced the attainability of the American Dream, while also satirizing the central tenets of the concept as it was understood in the new industrial nation. They problematised the idea of an open class structure, de-emphasising the significance of working as a means of social advancement and using the middle-class home as a setting to explore questions around personal and social hierarchies. Ideas about gender and race were weaved into the construction of class identity, clearly signifying the exclusive nature of the 'everyday' mainstream society the strips portrayed. Consumption as a means of demonstrating social superiority was sometimes valorized, and sometimes undermined, and the competing ideas of transient and fixed class identity were equally built up and knocked down. The increased focus on everyday household issues as a lens through which to view social interactions and concerns over social status began in around 1910, peaked in the early 1920s, and

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[12] Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (London, 2018).

then faded around the time of the Wall Street Crash, largely being replaced thereafter by dramatic suspense stories.[13] While the earlier period (1897-1912) is referenced in this chapter where relevant, there was a noticeable shift in content around 1912 towards strips that engaged with the idea of mainstream American life. For that reason, the majority of discussion focuses on this later period.

The strange position of class in American history

While historians and commentators often discuss middle-class readers or working-class culture, the very concept of the American class system is fraught with ambiguity. Unlike its European counterparts, America did not have a feudal past, out of which a class structure might naturally evolve. The white male egalitarianism of the Early Republic, coupled with the potency of race-based social hierarchies, made a class structure harder for citizens to see. Yet numerous historians have uncovered evidence of distinct class consciousness in the States.[14] Class discourse in America has often revolved around two competing narratives: the idea that America is fundamentally classless existing in opposition to interpretations of industrial development that focus on working-class consciousness. Ultimately, as Sherry Linkon and John Russo have

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[13] While adventure strips had been in existence since 1906 with the introduction of *Hairbreadth Harry*, they became increasingly more popular in the 1920s, with the creation of strips like *Wash* Tubbs. The 1930s would see adventure strips dominate the comics pages, and the 'funnies' of the later 1930s had already begun to shift focus from the everyday to the dramatic. Across the various strips, there were kidnappings, cases of mistaken identity, characters getting amnesia or lost in the wilderness and even one instance of time travel.

[14] Lizabeth Cohen, 'Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s', *American Quarterly*, 41 (March 1989), pp. 6–33; Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers* (Berkeley, 1989). For a fascinating exploration of the self-aware nineteenth-century American bourgeoisie J. Rosenbaum and S. Beckert, *The American Bourgeoisie: Distinction and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2010).

argued, when class is acknowledged, Americans 'vacillate between viewing it as a matter of affiliation with a loosely-defined interest group and seeing it in more status-oriented terms, as the summation of a set of individual qualities that determine one's place at any moment in the social structure'.[15] However, they argue, the dominant form of class confusion has been a combination of both: the belief that class exists but that nearly all Americans belong to the middle class. Furthermore, the idea of the American Dream suggests that class standing is transient and not fixed: people are not inherently of one class or another, but can hope to move up the social ladder as a result of their endeavours. This tension, between the idea of class as a set of fixed qualities that mean individuals are inherently of one class or another and the notion that class is situational and temporary, is central to the comics' treatment of social status and class identity.

The middle decades of the nineteenth century saw a clear shift in popular understandings of class and social hierarchy, as explored in Stuart Blumin's seminal 1989 book, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900.* Blumin argues that this period saw the development of a clearly stratified class system, with a defined, self-conscious middle class. This shift was typified by poet Walt Whitman's 1858 description of 'the middle class' as 'the men of moderate means, living at the rate of a thousand dollars a year or thereabouts'.[16] As Blumin notes, this casual association of social class with a specific level of income (and indeed the use of the term 'middle class' at all) was a departure from the previous tendency to refer to people of 'middling rank' or 'middling sort', phrases related more to social

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[15] Sherry Linkon and John Russo, 'Class Confusions: American Media Discourse about Class', *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 46 (2001), p. 367.
[16] Walt Whitman, *I Sit and Look Out: Editorials from the Brooklyn Daily Times by Walt Whitman,* (1932), p. 145, cited in Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*.

respectability than to a specific income level.[17] Building on Blumin's work, Melanie Archer and Judith Blau argued in 1993 that the new 'structure of feeling' that was both the expression and the legitimisation of middle class behaviour and ideals, went from strength to strength in postbellum America, and was requisite for the period of industrialisation and nation building to follow.[18] They contend that the occupational makeup of the middle class has depended on the period under consideration, with the artisan of the mid-nineteenth century replaced by the small capitalist of the early industrial period, and then finally the white-collar worker in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.[19] Thus, both the level of income, and the manner by which it was acquired are of equal significance in determining an individual's class status.

In America at the turn of the twentieth century, there was a clear structural distinction between middle-class white-collar workers and working-class blue-collar workers. White collar workers grew in number, with the service economy growing from 14% of the labour force in 1870 to encompass 37% by 1930.[20] At the same time, industrialization brought with it a permanent class of wage earners working in factories. At the turn of the twentieth century, half of Americans lived 'in poverty', with a sprawling (and increasingly multi-ethnic) urban poor, working in the factories and living in housing that reformers labelled as 'slums'.[21] Despite this, the persuasive idea of the American Dream - of upward social mobility and opportunity for all – flourished, meaning that even if industrial America did have clearly defined class boundaries, it was also

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[17] Stuart M. Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900 (Cambridge, 1989), p. 1.
[18] Margo Anderson, 'The Language of Class in Twentieth-Century America', *Social Science History*, 12 (1988), p. 30.
[19] Melanie Archer and Judith R. Blau, 'Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: The Case of the Middle Class', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 19 (1993), pp. 21–22.
[20] Anderson, 'The Language of Class in Twentieth-Century America', p. 353.
[21] Ibid., p. 354.

widely accepted that these boundaries were easy to cross.[22] As Archer and Blau demonstrate, towards the end of the nineteenth century there were more individuals moving into the middle classes (if defined by manual vs. non-manual labour) than there were leaving it: movement from manual to non-manual work was more common than the reverse.[23]

Widespread expectations of upwards mobility and the aspirational nature of middle-class status makes the idea of collective social identity based on class rather problematic in the early twentieth-century United States. A crucial component of the American Dream was the idea of the American standard of living – the idea of a middle-class lifestyle becoming accessible to the vast majority of the population. Most historians would agree with David Potter's assertion that 'for millions of people throughout the world, during the last three centuries, America has symbolised plenty'.[24] Despite the dislocations it caused, urban industrial society offered the possibility of such a lifestyle to the 'respectable' working class. As Margo Anderson explains, by the early twentieth century, conveniences associated with middle-class lifestyle like indoor plumbing, modern heating and lighting systems and even auto transformation were coming within the reach of a slim majority of Americans.[25] Historians have disagreed on the impact of consumerism on class consciousness, particularly in relation to the working classes. Most notably, Lizabeth Cohen has shown in several thought-provoking works how ethnic working-class culture in Chicago was often strengthened by the acquisition of consumer goods like the radio, and largely

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[22] Roland Marchand explains how the advertising industry in the 1920s and 1930s adapted the notion of the American Dream to the modern industrail society, seeking to demonstrate that consumer products could enable Americans to achieve 'individualism, equality, personal interaction, and cost-free progress within the emerging mass society.' See Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, p. xxii.

[23] Archer and Blau, 'Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America', pp. 29–30.

[24] David Morris Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago, 1954), p. 166.

[25] Anderson, 'The Language of Class in Twentieth-Century America', p. 353.

unaffected by the introduction of chain stores, advertising and mass-produced goods.[26]

Nevertheless, the language of class, and in particular the way Americans defined the middle

class, was bound up with the language of consumerism and material culture.

By the turn of the century, Americans increasingly understood social class in terms of both how

people acquired money, and what they spent it on. The consumer society did not erase the idea of

an American class system, but it altered its perceived parameters. As the twentieth century

continued, an increasing proportion of Americans saw themselves as being or aspiring to be

middle class, regardless of their occupation, imagining a small upper class above them, and

working poor below.[27] The comics helped to reinforce this picture of American life, perpetuating

the pervasive mythology that the middle class represented the American 'everyman' – an idea

which Lawrence Samuel argues is central to the definition of American national identity.[28]

Yet the funny pages also engaged with the second definition of class identity: the idea of a set of

inherent qualities and behaviours that defined a person's true social rank. Even outside academic

discourse, an ambiguous idea of cultural hierarchy that broadly mirrors class structures, with

terms like 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' serves to express the understanding that equates certain

activities with a person's social standing. Catherine Rottenberg uses the term 'class passing' to

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[26] Cohen, 'Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots'; Lizabeth Cohen, 'The New Deal State and the Making of Citizen Consumers', in Charles McGovern, Matthias Judt, and Susan Strasser, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 111–125.

[27] Anderson, 'The Language of Class in Twentieth-Century America', p. 355. This often unrealistic self-definition was noted by Sarah Igo in her discussion of the public reaction to a Life photoshoot that accompanied the Middletown surveys of the 1930 – residents of the overwhelmingly working-class area of Muncie strongly objected to the visual depiction of their town in this way, with complaints that what they perceived as the 'middle' majority had been left out of the picture. See Igo, *The Averaged American*, p. 94.

[28] Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American Middle Class: A Cultural History* (New York, 2013), p. 5.

describe the process by which people can acquire attributes associated with a higher class and seek to appropriate that class's belief system, arguing that this was a common practice in Progressive-era American society.[29] This would suggest that even in a social structure perceived as both fairly fluid and dominated by a middle-class mainstream, certain values and behaviours – or the broader ideas of cultural and intellectual capital –were associated with the different classes; to gain and retain membership in the middle class required the convincing appropriation and adoption of these behaviours as well as the acquisition of the material goods associated with a middle-class lifestyle.

Because of their role as circulation builders, the comics needed to tap into mainstream attitudes and desires, for the simple fact that they had to appeal to as many people as possible. As such, it is reasonable to assume, as many commentators have done, that their content both reflected and shaped popular perceptions of how society was organised. The depiction of class-based social hierarchy in the comic strips in this study reflected the complicated combination of all the areas discussed thus far: the workplace, the family, consumption and consumer behaviour and cultural and intellectual capital. While each strip was different, certain commonalities existed, building up a picture of American middle class culture that was both broadly aspirational and extremely exclusive. As a group, the comics reinforced the idea that – certainly by the 1930s – the American middle class had become synonymous with the American mainstream, but efforts to gain and maintain a middle-class lifestyle led to a profound sense of status anxiety, and a permanent tension between exhibiting middle-class behaviours and actually belonging to that

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[29] Catherine Rottenberg, 'Salome of the Tenements, the American Dream and Class Performativity', *American Studies*, 45 (2004), p. 74.

group was evident in many of the strips. The idea of 'class passing' was a central theme in several strips, again challenging the uncomplicated idea of a middle-class American populace united around a set of shared values and consumer behaviour.

At a superficial level, the comics perpetuated the notion of a more accessible, open middle-class, based primarily on the home setting instead of the workplace. Not determined by the occupation of the family's main breadwinner, membership of the middle-class mainstream in the world of the comics was demonstrated by the acquisition of cultural capital, consumer choices and behaviour. Financial status and occupation remained important, but did not determine one's social rank. Indeed, people were often shown to be living from week to week, yet still able to keep up with the spending demands of a middle-class lifestyle. The pressure to 'keep up with the Joneses' was heightened by the fact that in the comics, money was easy-come easy-go; despite the Progressive Era preoccupation with urban living standards, poverty was ultimately portrayed as a temporary affliction and not a fundamental social state that represented a way of life for a relatively large proportion of the population. Alongside this seemingly open societal hierarchy, though, was the underlying understanding that, to borrow Rottenberg's terminology, 'class passing' relied on more than money. Failure to demonstrate the right behaviours – which had racial and gendered overtones – or embrace the correct values could expose a social fraud. Social hierarchy and the inaccessibility of the upper echelons of the American class system thus remained a central preoccupation in the strips.

Coding class in the comics

The comics in this study cover a range of topics and characters in different social situations. Dividing the strips into 'working class' and 'middle class' is problematic and represents an academic desire for neatness, rather than a meaningful division of the material. Rather, the strips can be divided into three broad categories: 'classless' strips, whose characters and settings were movable, suburban family strips, which embraced the setting of the middle-class domestic sphere, and ethnic strips, whose protagonists' class identity was inherently connected to their immigrant background. The following section introduces each group of strips, providing a brief overview of each comic's storylines and characters, and outlining the way that they dealt with themes relating to class identity and social status.

The early 'classless' strips

The three earlier strips in the study – *Katzenjammer Kids* (published from 1897)*, Happy Hooligan* (published from 1900) and *Mutt and Jeff* (published from 1907) - are more accurately described as classless than as working class. *Katzenjammer Kids* features a German family, but the strip rarely engages with social questions, with the emphasis on the trickery of the twin boys and the wrath of their pseudo-father figure, Der Captain. In the other two strips, the main characters lack any degree of permanence. The protagonists are rootless, without permanent jobs, permanent addresses, or a stable family setting. Indeed, the characterising feature of both *Hooligan* and *Mutt and Jeff* is travel. The lighthearted treatment of the lack of a permanent home setting in these comics is interesting, in the context of what Richard Cresswell describes as a 'moral panic' over tramps, which centred around the threat of their geographical mobility and general rootlessness, that gripped the nation between 1870 and the outbreak of World War

Two.[30] While there is no hint of malice towards - or fear of - either Happy or Mutt and Jeff in these strips, they do befall constant mishaps. Their smart clothes and high class tastes and acquaintances complicate their social position, as while they lack a permanent home, they are obviously not quite in the same category as tramps. However, the titles that featured them may well have served a social purpose, enabling readers to explore their fears. Alternatively of course, they could be interpreted as evidence of the comic artists' intent to gently satirise middle-class reformers' excessive panic on the issue, a strategy that was common in the comics (see chapter 3 on hyper-patriotism during World War One).

While these strips might be picking up on common class concerns relating to vagrancy and working-class transience, they do not make class commentary a focus and are some way removed from everyday social reality. Neither strip purports to be representing real life scenarios, with the majority of their humour derived from a combination of slapstick and farce. Physical comedy is used regularly and with great effect. In both *Happy Hooligan* and *Mutt and Jeff*, the main characters manage to hobnob with aristocrats, politicians and even royalty, despite being penniless and, often, homeless. While these strips continued into the 1920s and 1930s, they largely retained the slapstick/gag comedy characteristics of the earliest comics.

Katzenjammer Kids| Rudolph Dirks, Harold Knerr| 1897-2006

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[30] Tim Cresswell, *The tramp in America* (London, 2001).
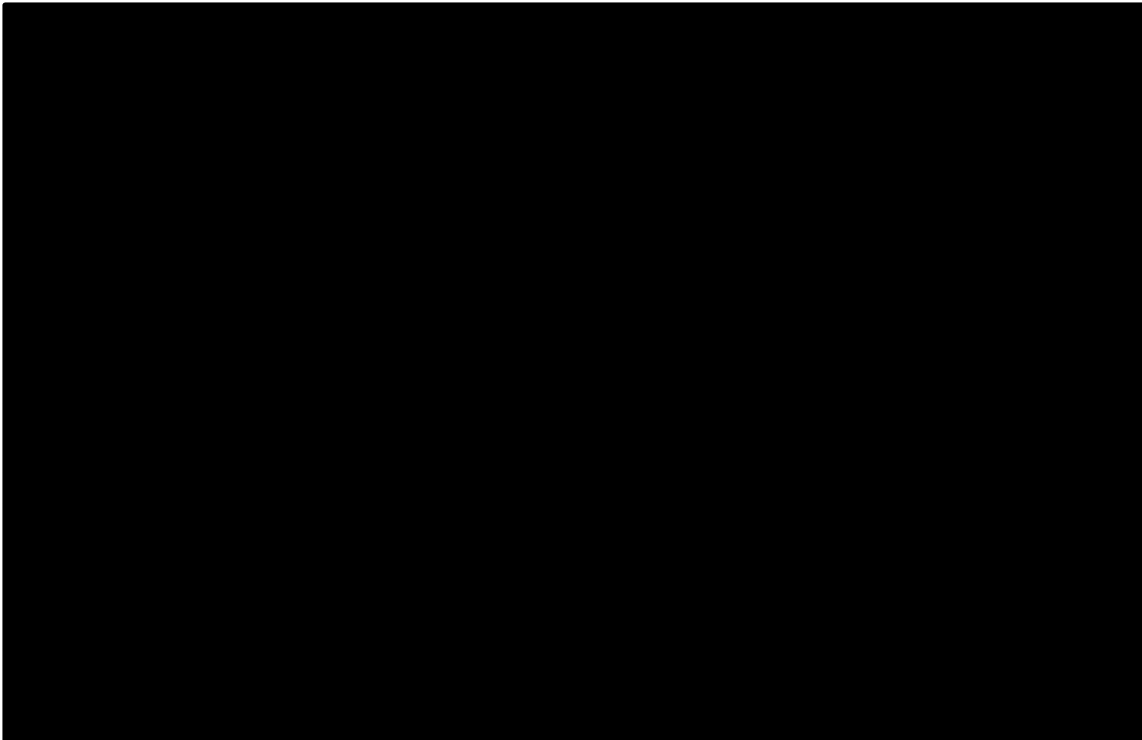
Figure 11: 'The Katzenjammer Kids Take Adolph to School', *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* 9 April 1905.

Rudolph Dirks' *Katzenjammer Kids* was initially based on the 1860s German children's story *Max und Moritz* by Wilhelm Busch.[31] Like the older story, the strip featured the rebellious antics of a pair of boys (Hans and Fritz) who played constant pranks on their mother (Mama) and the strip's surrogate father figure, Der Captain. While the strip was often berated for its negative influence on children, the twins did usually end up with a sound beating from Der Captain once their antics had been discovered, something that is reflected in the translation of the German phrase 'katzenjammer' – which can mean both 'the wailing of cats' and 'contrition after a failed endeavour'.[32] After Dirks left Hearst's papers, the strip was carried on by another German, Harold Knerr, who kept the themes very consistent. Settings range from Hans and Fritz's

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[31] *American Comic Strips Before 1918*, p. 6.
[32] *American Comic Strips Before 1918*, p. 6.

schoolroom, to a tropical jungle, to the home of the family. The domestic setting changes from tending to picture the kitchen table – associated with food preparation and labour –in the earliest strips to the drawing room – associated with entertaining and leisure – after around 1915. The strip does not attempt any degree of continuity, with each day providing a new and exciting adventure for the boys. While they have domestic servants in the later strips, and occasionally seem to socialise with millionaires, the schoolroom depicted in the early years is filled with a collection of children of varying races. *The Katzenjammer Kids* consistently avoids any significant engagement with social topics, instead focusing on the excitement of pirate ships and faraway lands, meeting royals and exploring the jungle.

Happy Hooligan | Frederick Burr Opper | 1900-1932
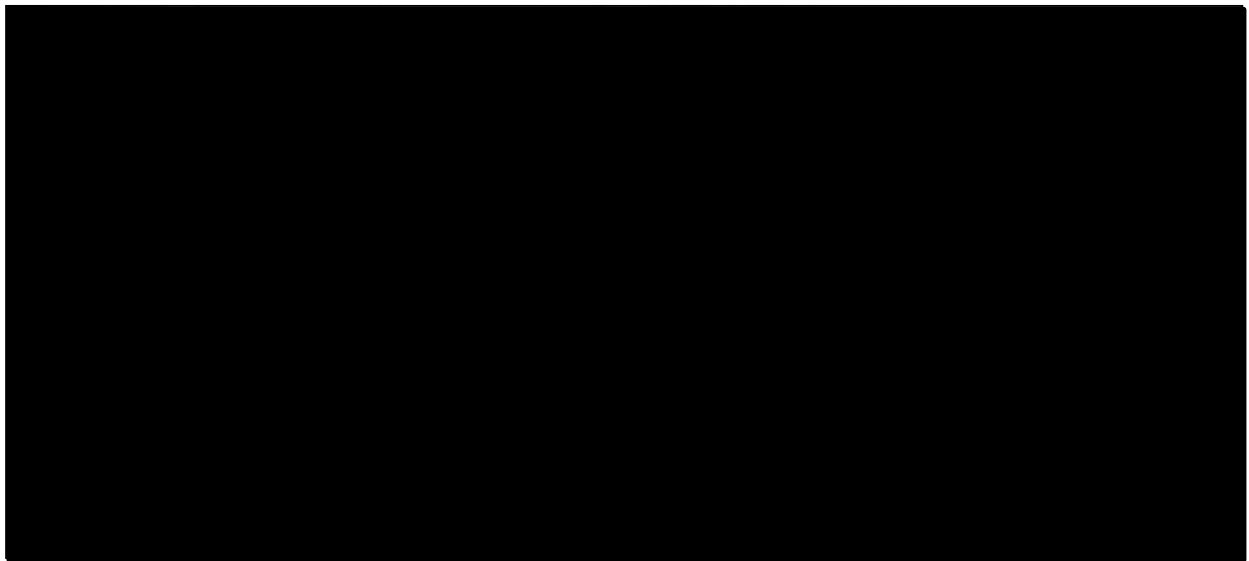
Figure 12: 'Happy Hooligan', St Louis Republic, 5 January 1905.

Happy Hooligan was created by Frederick Burr Opper as a full-page Sunday strip, comprising six (or sometimes eight) panels. Opper had been a prominent political cartoonist in the late 1800s

and was the only one of his professional peers to gain success and expand his career into the new medium of the twentieth century. He joined the *New York Journal* in 1899 under William Randolph Hearst and began drawing *Happy Hooligan* in 1900.[33] Happy, a well-meaning but perpetually unlucky down-and-out pseudo-tramp, fulfilled the role of the comic everyman and sympathetic fool. In line with other comics of this period (such as Buster Brown, Hogan's Alley and the Katzenjammer Kids) humour was derived primarily through provoking readers' sympathy for the unwitting victim of an accident or practical joke, usually Happy himself.[34] A standard set up saw Happy in a social situation in which he would try and do the right thing but end up causing mayhem, frequently landing himself in jail. In the slapstick tradition of silent cinema and vaudeville, the mayhem often involved breakages or physical injury, to both Happy and his companions. Through it all, he maintains his guileless smile and happy-go-lucky attitude. While Happy is an everyman is a comedic sense, it would be difficult to argue that he was intended to represent any kind of archetypal or relatable American man.

The storylines in the strip are not intended to depict real life either. Despite his destitution and lack of smarts, Happy spends his days exploring the world and getting himself into ridiculous social situations. In 1905, Happy travels through England and Scotland, attending a Royal Charity Bazaar, visiting the British museum and socialising with judges and aristocrats.[35] In 1906, he and his brothers move on to Italy before coming back to the States and being thrown

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33 Tom Culbertson, 'The Golden Age of American Political Cartoons', *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 7 (July 2008), p. 282.
34 Alfred McClung Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America* (London, 2000), 1 & 2, p. 401.
35 'Happy Hooligan', *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 15 January 1905, 'Happy Hooligan', *St Louis Republic*, 5 March 1905, 'Happy Hooligan', *St Louis Republic*, 22 January 1905.

into a mental asylum.[36] 1907 sees Happy travelling around the United States, and in 1908 he finds himself caught up with an African tribe, imprisoned by King Zoozoo.[37] The theme continues over the next few years, with Happy getting lost in the Arctic, revisiting England and duelling with a French admiral.[38] Finally, around 1912, Happy's pursuit of his love interest (Suzanne, who we first encounter in 1908) becomes the chief storyline of the strip. Over the next four years, Happy's futile attempts to woo and then marry his beloved provide the majority of the joke's punchlines; Happy's constant mishaps and inability to win over Suzanne's uncle providing constant barriers to their union. Even after their marriage in 1916, the overall character of the strip remains the same.[39] Happy and Suzanne visit Egypt (where Happy is kidnapped and then committed to an asylum), and in 1918 they join the Chinese Secret Service for a short while, before Happy finds himself yet again in the jungle - this time captured by the Bongo tribe.[40] The strips stopped appearing in newspapers between 1918 and 1926 - it is not clear whether this was due to the strip itself ceasing publication or simply due to gaps in archival collections - and when it returned did so under a different moniker. From 1927 through to 1932 when the strip finished, the same themes of travel to faraway places, farcical scenarios and accidental disasters continued to dominate.

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[36] 'Happy Hooligan', *Salt Lake Herald*, 14 January 1906, 'Happy Hooligan', *Salt Lake Herald*, 6 May 1906.
[37] 'Happy Hooligan', *Salt Lake Herald*, 23 August 1908.
[38] For the Arctic storyline see 'Happy Hooligan', *Spokane Press*, (23 January, 5 February, 12 February, 5 March 1910). In England: 'Happy Hooligan', *Salt Lake Tribune*, 18 February 1912. The duel with the admiral begins with 'Happy Hooligan', *Salt Lake Tribune*, 7 April 1912 and continues into September. The last strip on the topic is 'Happy Hooligan', *Salt Lake Tribune*, 8 September 1912.
[39] The pair finally marries in 'Happy Hooligan', *Omaha Daily Bee*, 18 June 1916.
[40] 'Happy Hooligan', *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 4 March 1917, 'Happy Hooligan', *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 24 March 1917, 'Happy Hooligan', *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 11 November 1917, 'Happy Hooligan', *Omaha Daily Bee*, 19 May 1918.
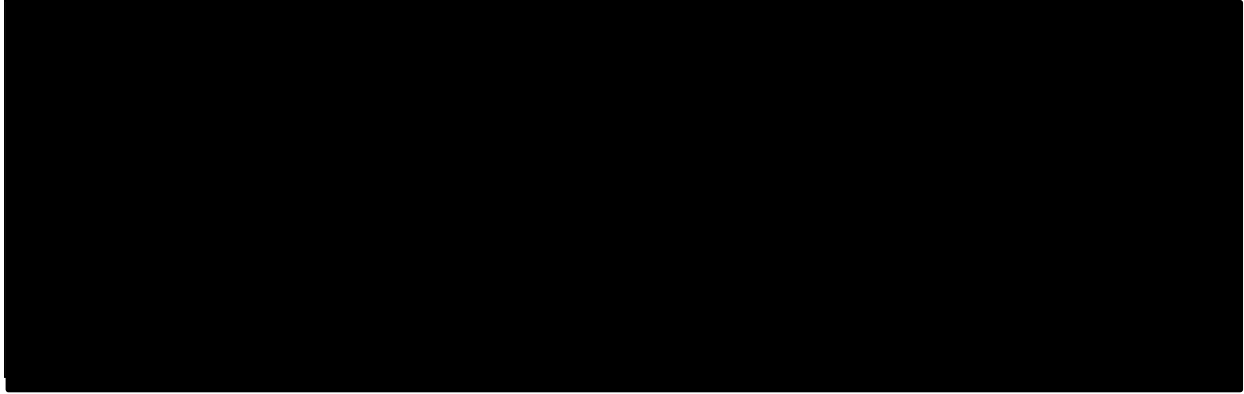
Figure 13: Mutt and Jeff, *Washington Evening Star*, 21 December 1912.

Mutt and Jeff, drawn by Bud Fisher, had many similarities to *Happy Hooligan*. Like Opper's

comic, *Mutt and Jeff* did not take place in any permanent or really realistic setting. The

protagonists - tall, lanky Augustus Mutt and short, stocky Jeff - are a pair of middle-aged

chancers, whose antagonistic relationship is based on constant one-upmanship and often physical

violence. Mutt came across Jeff when visiting him in an insane asylum in 1908, the year after the

strip debuted.[41] The majority of the time they both appear in the strip, acting as a comedy double

act in which one of the two - usually Jeff - often ends up with a black eye. While their perpetual

lack of funds is a regular theme in the strip (they are frequently depicted hiding from their

landlady because they have not paid their rent), it does not stop them from travelling widely

across America and the world.[42] Often these travels are for work with both Mutt and Jeff both

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[41] Goulart, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, p. 270.
[42] The rent issue is the focus of 'Mutt and Jeff', *Washington Evening Star* (7 January 1911, 10 January 1911, 24 January 1911), *Topeka Daily State Journal* (6 September 1916, 8 September 1916, 9 September 1916, 20 April 1918), *Boston Evening Globe,* 6 September 1922, *Miami Daily Arizona Silver Belt*, 11 April 1924, *Portsmouth Daily Times* (11 January 1926, 13 January 1926, 14 January 1926, 15 January 1926, 16 January 1926), *Canton Daily*

holding down a wide variety of jobs. The early strips see them travel to Mexico, Scotland, France, and England.[43] They join the army in 1915, spending time in the American, Russian and British forces.[44] While female characters do not feature often, it is revealed in December 1910 that Mutt does have an estranged wife (Mrs. Mutt) and son (Cicero).[45] Mutt does not live with them or support his wife. In line with the overall trend towards depicting a more mainstream every day setting, after the Mutts reconcile in 1912, the domestic setting gains importance, and marriage – in particular the common trope of the disappointing husband and violent, temperamental wife – is used more frequently.[46]

Suburban family strips

The majority of strips in this study were set in middle-class, suburban households with their subject matter focused on the everyday trials and tribulations of 'everyday' American life. Five strips - The *Bungle Family, Gasoline Alley, The Gumps, Doings of the Duffs* and *Polly and Her Pals* – took place in a family setting, although the characters in each occupied various positions and in different locations. *The Bungle Family* follows a couple who live in apartment buildings

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News, 30 August 1928, *Syracuse Herald* (27 March 1934, 27 August 1934, 5 November 1934), *Frederick Daily News* (11 July 1935, 6 September 1935, 7 September 1935)

[43] In Mexico: 'Mutt and Jeff', *Washington Evening Star*, 27 November 1913 and *Omaha Daily Bee,* 29 November 1913. In Scotland: 'Mutt and Jeff', *Washington Evening Star,* 14 June 1911. In France: 'Mutt and Jeff', *Miami Daily Arizona Silver Belt* (29 April 1924, 30 April 1924, 1 May 1924, 5 May 1924, 6 May 1924, 12 May 1924, 26 November 1924, 3 December 1924, 10 December 1924, 12 December 1924, 15 December 1924, 16 December 1924, 17 December 1924, 20 December 1924). In England: 'Mutt and Jeff', *Washington Evening Star,* 31 May 1911, *Portsmouth Daily Times* (14 November 1925, 16 November 1925, 20 November 1925), *Frederick Daily Times* (6 May 1935, 7 May 1935, 8 May 1935, 10 May 1935).

[44] They join the American army: 'Mutt and Jeff', *Tulsa Daily World,* 8 September 1915; Russian army: *Topeka Daily State Journal,* 15 March 1916, they are in the British army: *Topeka Daily State Journal*, 5 September 1918.

[45] The first mention of Mutt's estranged wife is in 'Mutt and Jeff', *El Paso Herald,* 26 December 1910.

[46] The couple have reconciled in 'Mutt and Jeff', *El Paso Herald,* 9 March 1912.

in various lower-middle class urban neighbourhoods.[47] *Gasoline Alley* was set in small town suburban America, presumably somewhere in or near New York State.[48] *The Gumps, Doings of the Duffs* and *Polly and Her Pals* are both set within middle-class families who live in the suburbs, on the outskirts of a larger city. Finally, *Tillie the Toiler* is the only comic in the study to take place primarily in a work environment: Tillie was based in a respectable white-collar office environment, and its title character travelled into work from the small suburban home she shared with her mother. While its title may appear to hint at the idea that the new, office work of the era was just as much 'labor' as producing through manual work, in reality it is a sarcastic dig at the protagonist's minimal efforts at the office.

Polly and Her Pals | Cliff Sterrett | 1912 - 1958
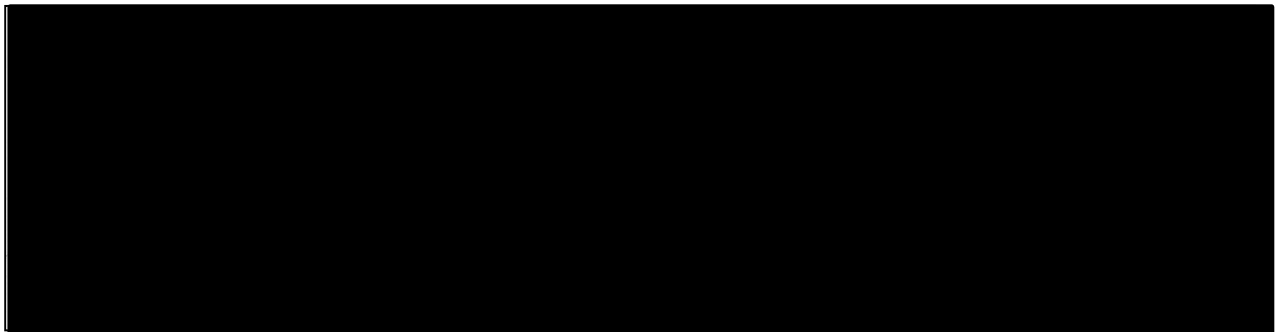
Figure 14: Polly and Her Pals, Washington Times, 23 September 1921.

The all-American family home became a staple of the comic pages from 1912, with the introduction of Cliff Sterrett's *Polly and Her Pals* (initially titled *Positive Polly*). The strip featured the extended Perkins family, comprising Samuel (Pa) Perkins, Suzie (Ma) Perkins, Polly

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[47] Goulart, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, p. 58.
[48] In June 1923 the alley men go on a road trip and they begin from New York City.

Perkins (their daughter), cousins Ashur and Delicia, Aunt Maggie and servant Neewah. Later additions included Pa's sister-in-law Carrie and her daughter Gertrude, who came to live with the Perkins family in December 1929.[49] Despite the titular suggestion that the strip centred on Polly and her friends, Pa Perkins was the main protagonist, with Polly's significance fading as the years passed. The relations between the characters, the running of the house and other domestic issues made up the majority of the strip's storylines across the entire period. While the strip was still amusing, it was not a gag strip like many of those before it and represented a subtle stylistic departure from previous comics. Firmly focused on the everyday experiences of the Perkins family, *Polly and Her Pals* featured extended storylines that often lasted weeks or even months. The comics introduced earlier had already established the practice of featuring the same set of characters, but *Polly and Her Pals* was arguably the first strip to move decisively from a "sketch" format to one more recognisable as situational comedy, in which the setting as well as the characters remains constant from strip to strip. In this way, the comics of the 1910s were an important precursor to American radio sitcoms like Amos 'n' Andy, which are usually credited as the first cultural product to use the sitcom format.[50]

Doings of the Duffs | Walter Allman | 1916 – 1931

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[49] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Sandusky Register,* 6 December 1929.
[50] Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder, eds., *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed* (Albany, 2005), p. 128.

Figure 15: Doings of the Duffs, *Seattle Star,* 11 December 1920

Building on the success of the new genre, Walter Allman's *Doing of the Duffs* first appeared in

1916, featuring a similar extended family set up. Tom and Helen Duff live with Helen's cousin

Olivia and Tom's nephew Wilbur. Helen gives birth to Danny Duff in 1918 and his little sister

Betty in 1923.[51] Wilbur (after failing as an actor and a travelling salesman and enjoying a brief

stint in the army in 1918) goes to work in Tom's office.[52] After several romances he meets Doris,

and elopes in 1921.[53] He and his new wife move into a small 'fold-down' apartment next door to

Tom and Helen.[54] Aside from occasional forays into the city or on holiday, the majority of the

strips are set at the Duff household or their suburban neighbourhood, and storylines focus on the

everyday lives and experiences of the characters until the late 1920s, when the strip, like many

others, began experimenting with adventure stories. Very little information about the strip, or its

creator, can be found online or in any archival collections.

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[51] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Tacoma Times*, 17 January 1918, *Iowa City Press Citizen*, 9 March 1923.
[52] 'Doings of the Duffs', *West Virginian,* 3 December 1918, *Seattle Star*, 28 January 1921, *Muscatine Journal,* 30 January 1926.
[53] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* 8 September 1921.
[54] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* 5 October 1921.
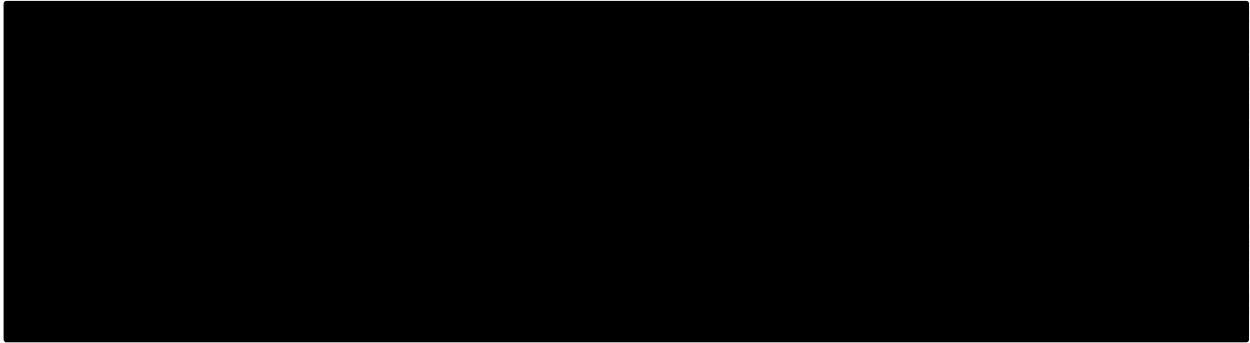
Figure 16: The Gumps, *Philadelphia Evening Ledger*, 27 August 1918.

Although arguably the most famous family strip, *The Gumps* was actually the last in this study to join the comics page. It first appeared in 1918 when it was commissioned by the editor of the *Chicago Tribune*.[55] The strip followed the antagonistic relationship between Andy and Min Gump, the exploits of their son Chester (and much later, his little brother Goliath, born in 1928) and the visits from their Australian billionaire Uncle Bim. The majority of the strip's early storylines centre on Andy and Min's marital relationship, relative power and domestic battles, and their reliance on Bim's visits (and handouts) to maintain their middle-class suburban lifestyle. Andy spends the majority of his time complaining about Min, the servant, their friends, the state of the world and any other subject he can think of. In 1922 Andy runs for Congress and in 1924 for president.[56] Neither campaign is successful. The other major storyline, which garnered considerable attention among its readers, was the will-they won't-they relationship between Uncle Bim and a local woman, the Widow Zander.[57] The storyline reached its climax in

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[55] Goulart, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, p. 164.

[56] 'The Gumps', *Bakersfield Californian,* 30 August 1922, *Lincoln Star,* 13 June 1924.

[57] Anecdotal evidence suggests that such was the level of interest in this storyline that the Minneapolis Board of Trade suspended operations for several hours while they waited to find out whether Bim had been ensnared by Zander. See Arthur W. Crawford, 'At Last, At Last! Arthur Crawford Talks for Publication About Tribune Comics', *The Chicago Tribune*, April 1928, corroborated by Ron Goulart, *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, p. 165.

1922 when Bim left the widow at the altar - much to the relief of the money-hungry Andy and Min.[58] Zander continued to play a significant part in the strip for its duration, becoming embroiled with a local criminal and ultimately turning her affections to the Gumps' neighbour, a wealthy businessman called Tom Carr whose own tragic love life gave the strip an alternative focus for several months in 1928.[59] During the late 1920s Smith began dedicating more time to storylines focusing on drama and intrigue, but the family basis of the strip was maintained nonetheless. Smith died in 1935 in a car accident, shortly after negotiating a new contract with the syndicate, and the strip was passed on to another artist, Gus Edson.[60]

Gasoline Alley | Frank King | 1918 – present day
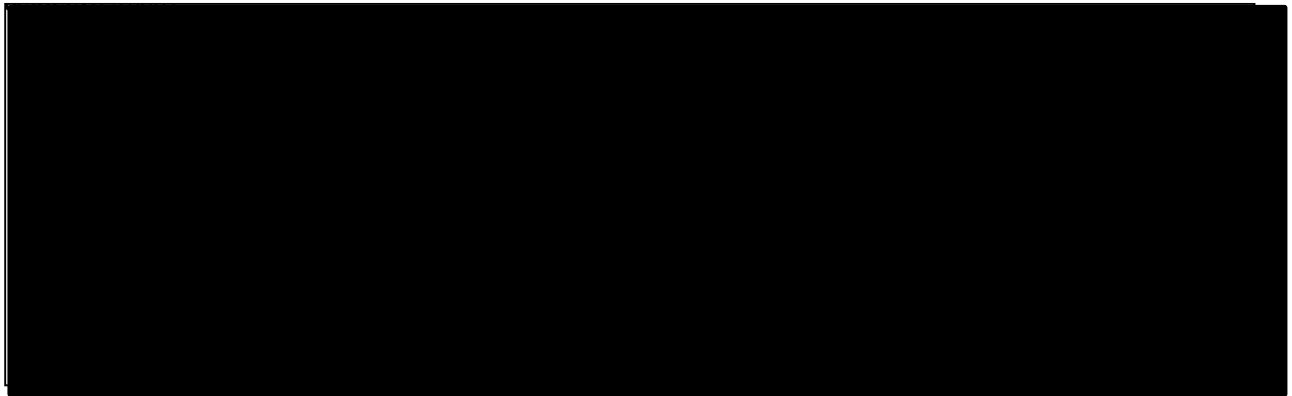
Figure 17: Gasoline Alley, *Hamilton Evening Journal*, 20 March 1928.

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[58] 'The Gumps', *Fort Wayne Sentinel,* 13 April 1922.

[59] Tom Carr's fiancée, Mary Gold, was the first major comic character to meet her death on the page. After a long drawn out and tumultuous romance with Tom Carr, his wrongful imprisonment and her nearly marrying the banker who had framed her beloved, Mary died in April 1929, seemingly of a broken heart. According to Robert C. Harvey's *The Art of the Funnies* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1994) the public response to her end was enormous: mail rooms 'overflowed with letters expressing sympathy and outrage… the outburst of popular sentiment promptly exploded all across the country.' (p. 60).

[60] 'Sidney Smith, 58, Creator of Gumps, Dies in Auto Crash', *Alton Evening Telegraph* (21 October 1935).

The success of the kitchen sink formula was highlighted when *Gasoline Alley*, a strip that originally centred on cars, abruptly shifted focus to appeal to a wider (and female) audience in 1921. This was achieved with the introduction of an abandoned baby – and then a love interest – for the main character, enabling the primary setting of the strip to move from the car garage to the home.[61] It had debuted as a Sunday strip in 1918, drawn by Frank King at the behest of *Chicago Tribune* publisher Robert McCormick. The strip originally centred around four male characters and their interest in automobiles. Its intended audience was the growing population of middle-class men buying and learning to maintain their own cars in this period. The strip's central protagonist, Walt Wallet, was the only unmarried character at the start of the strip, and was often seen congratulating himself on his single lifestyle and expressing smug sympathy for the marital issues of his three friends, Doc, Avery and Bill. After the arrival of the baby - Skeezix (and a live-in black housekeeper and nanny, Rachel) - in 1921, *Gasoline Alley* only occasionally featured panels devoted entirely to discussing cars. More often than not, the storylines were in line with the other comics of the same genre, dealing with love, marriage, family, money and domestic issues. Walt married the mysterious widow Phylis Blossom in 1926, and they had a son of their own (Corkleigh) in May 1928.[62] Not long after, they take in a teenage cousin, Lora, who lives with them for several years.[63] The strip experimented with adventure and suspense storylines throughout the 20s, with Skeezix's birth mother, an opera singer called Madame Octave, popping up every now and again to create some drama. She kidnaps Skeezix twice: once

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[61] Baby Skeezix was left on Walt Wallet's doorstep on Valentine's Day, 1921.
[62] 'Gasoline Alley', *Charleston Daily Mail*, 25 June 1926, *Hamilton Evening Journal*, 2 May 1928.
[63] 'Gasoline Alley', *Mansfield News,* 9 October 1928.

in 1924 and then again in 1927.[64] While the alley community is the primary setting for the strip, King utilised the concept of the road trip more than once, sending Walt round America and enabling him to include depictions of many locations. *Gasoline Alley*, with its gently-paced storylines and realistic characters has a slightly different tone to the other suburban strips. The strip is rarely gag-based, and better described as an amusing chronicle of the everyday experiences (and occasionally, fantastical dramas) that befall Walt and his family in their modest lives.

The Bungle Family| Harry Tuthill | 1918 - 1945
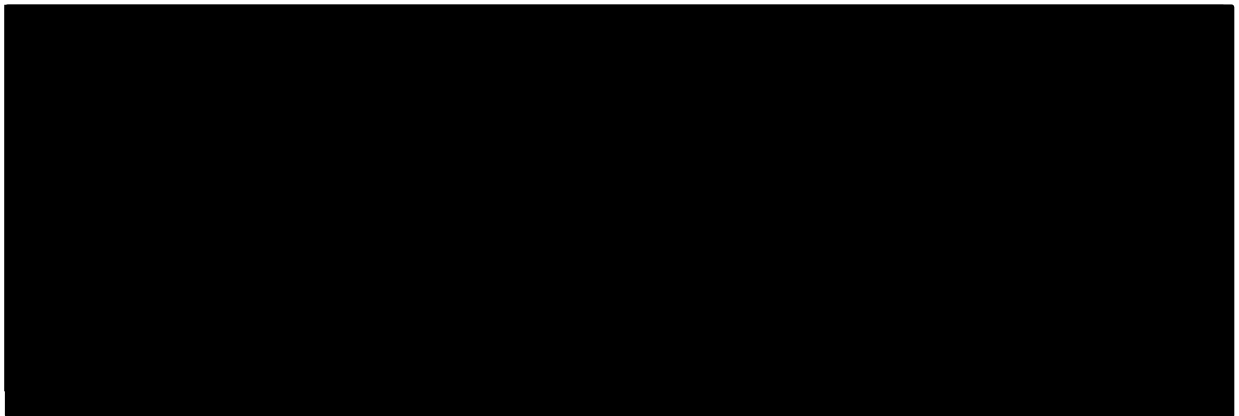
Figure 18: 'The Bungle Family', *Canton Daily News*, 14 January 1928.

Originally appearing under a different name *(Home Sweet Home) The Bungle Family* introduced George and Josephine Bungle in 1918, drawn by Harry Tuthill for the *New York Evening Mail.* Two years after the strip was picked up by the McNaught syndicate in 1923, it changed its name to *The Bungle Family.* George and Jo lived in a variety of walk-ups, and their run-ins with the

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[64] 'Gasoline Alley', *Charleston Daily Mail*, 15 May 1924, *Massillon Evening Independent*, 10 May 1927.

neighbours, and constant quarrels with one another, were a constant source of storylines for Tuthill. Through the 1920s, Tuthill experimented with continuity, introducing drama and intrigue through the romantic entanglements of George and Jo's daughter Peggy. George's apparent inability to stay on friendly terms with anyone resulted in numerous court appearances. Household problems, marital relations and unwanted household guests (usually extended family members) provide the majority of the laughs, with Tuthill delighting in satirising the issues facing the urban middle classes. Interspersed, though, were several storylines of a dramatic nature: in 1926 George is kidnapped by a ring of diamond thieves and taken 400 miles away.[65] He develops amnesia and sets himself with an entirely new life as businessman Edgar Steele (including the acquisition of a new fiancée) with Jo left at home, assuming he has run away with another woman. In 1928, he is hypnotised by a Swami and led to believe he is Gustave Brown and in 1935 he finds himself in a jungle with a tribe of natives, befriends a Sultan and finally travels 5000 years forward in time, to a society where women rule the world.[66]

Tillie the Toiler | Russ Westover | 1921 - 1959

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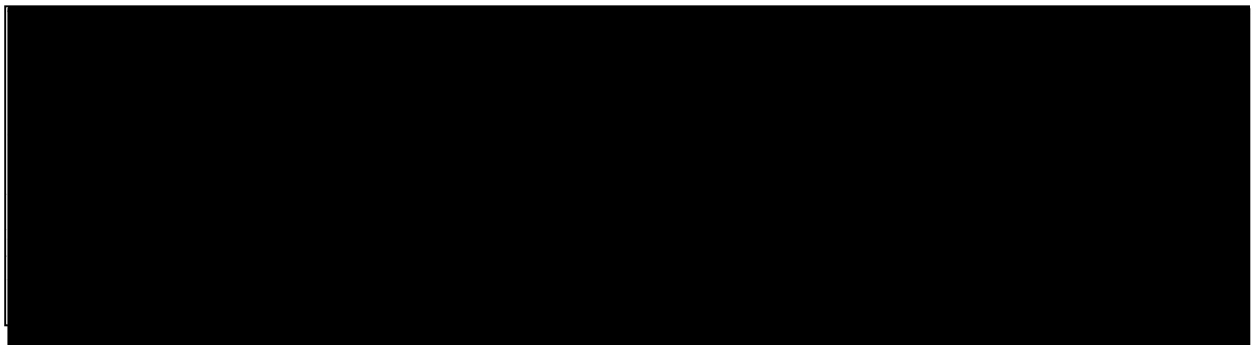
[65] George is kidnapped in 'The Bungle Family', *Lincoln Star,* 20 March 1926 and maintains the new life until 9 June 1926.
[66] 'The Bungle Family', *Canton News,* 7 May 1928, *Frederick Daily News,* (8 April 1935, 16 April 1935, 31 July 1935).

Figure 19: 'Tillie the Toiler', *Steubenville Herald Times*, 8 March 1922.

The final comic in this study, *Tillie the Toiler* was introduced by Russ Westover in 1921, following the success of other 'working girl' strips like *Winnie Winkle,* and syndicated by King Features. Stereotypical flapper Tillie Jones is a young and attractive young stenographer, who works at J. Simpkins and Co., alongside her colleagues: Mac, a big-nosed 'shrimp' whose longstanding adoration of Tillie is occasionally rewarded by a brief stint as her fiancé, Mr. Whipple and her stenographer friend Bubbles. The company originally manufactures and sells white goods but later moves into the fashion industry (much to Tillie's delight).[67] Tillie spends her earnings on dresses and dances, and is always touching up Mac for a loan to cover her until the next payday. Her romantic escapades feature in the vast majority of the strips, as she moves from man to man in her search for a rich and handsome husband. However, not to be outdone by his contemporaries producing other strips, Westover also experimented with dramatic and fantastical storylines, including Mac's kidnapping in December 1930 and subsequent memory loss in 1931, a disastrous vacation resulting in Tillie and Mac getting stranded on an island in 1932 and the invention of a sentient and very capable robot stenographer 'Rosie the Robot' in 1933.[68] Despite the strip's ironic title – Tillie is careful to avoid 'toil' at almost any cost – in the years of this study it did not engage with questions around the value of female employment or consider what white collar work might mean for women's station. Instead, Tillie fulfils the role

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[67] 'Tillie the Toiler', *East Liverpool Review Tribune,* 12 June 1934.
[68] Mac is kidnapped on Christmas Day 1930 (see *Marion Star*). He loses his memory in 'Tillie the Toiler', *East Liverpool Review Tribune,* 12 February 1931. They are stranded on the island in 'Tillie the Toiler', *East Liverpool Review Tribune,* 1 September 1932 and Rosie the Robot is introduced in 'Tillie the Toiler', East *Liverpool Review Tribune,* 11 July 1933.

of the 'flapper', the office setting ultimately undermining the idea of women achieving social advancement through their actions in the workplace.

White ethnic strips

Two of the strips in the study used white ethnicity as a means of exploring questions of class identity and social status, examining the efforts of immigrants to make their way up the American class ladder.[69] Both were created by second-generation immigrants, and featured white ethnic characters. The first, *Abie the Agent*, follows an urban Jewish bachelor, who works in a range of white-collar professions and exists in a universally Jewish social circle. By contrast, the second, *Bringing Up Father*, is set in an upper-class 'new money' household, featuring an Irish hod-carrier and his wife who have struck it rich and now mix with society elites and not the immigrant working community from which they originated. In different ways, the two strips examine the ideas of class passing and status anxiety, highlighting the inherent tensions in the idea of the American Dream.

Abie the Agent | Harry Herschfield | 1914 - 1940

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[69] While *The Katenjammer Kids* had German creators and characters, it did not explore social questions in the same way as the other two ethnic strips, acting primarily as a joke strip that utilized slapstick and gag humour.
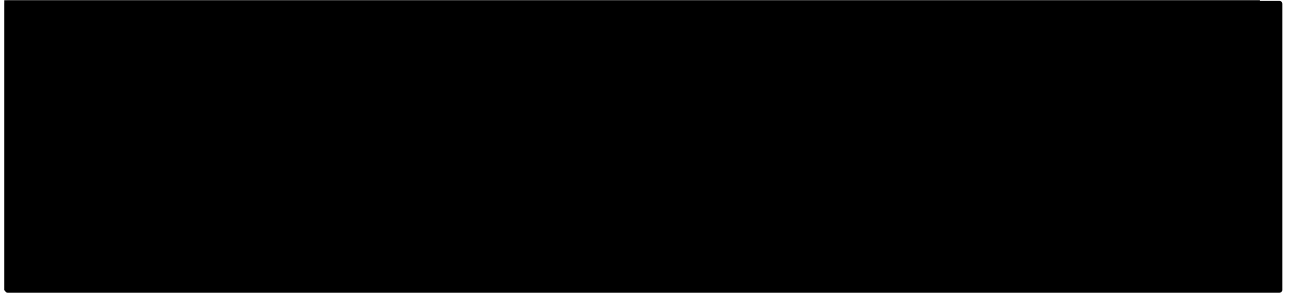
Figure 20: 'Abie the Agent', *Madison Capital Times*, 3 April 1924.

Abie the Agent, created by comic artist and second-generation Jew Harry Herschfield, was distributed by King Features syndicate from 1914. It was the first strip to feature an obviously Jewish protagonist. Set in the city, the strip follows Abe Kabibble, a second-generation Jewish bachelor, and his efforts to succeed in American society. The strip engages with the same ideas about social structure and class identity as its counterparts set in the suburbs, but its focus on a single character, usually seen at work or out in the city, sets it apart from the family strips with their domestic setting. Abe is a short, squat, hard-working single man in his late 30s (one strip in 1914 has him at 37, but another later in the year mentions that he is 39).[70] In his career on the page, Abe holds down dozens of jobs, often doing several at the same time. He begins as a car salesman, working for the Complex Auto Company, but by 1935 has also run a movie theater and a restaurant, worked as a sales clerk, a speeding inspector, an actor, a shoe salesman, and an office manager. In 1917 he joins the US army. He lives in a rented apartment, frequents a club and has a chauffeur. He marries his one-off love interest Reba in 1929, and they have a baby boy who is then looked after by a governess.[71] His income in 1928 is $27,000 per year, considerably

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[70] 'Abie the Agent', *El Paso Herald*, 7 March 1914; 'Abie the Agent', *El Paso Herald,* 6 June 1914.
[71] 'Abie the Agent', *Portsmouth Daily Times,* 27 February 1929, *Madison Capital Times,* 17 March 1930.

higher than the national average declared by the IRS of just $6,196.[72] Despite his relative wealth, Abe is constantly thinking about money and worrying about making ends meet. Abe's preoccupation with his social standing and what others think of him is a constant throughout the duration of the strip, with Hershfield using well-known Jewish stereotypes to explore the theme of social mobility and class status.

Bringing Up Father | George McManus | 1913 - 2000

Figure 21: Bringing Up Father, *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 20 June 1915.

The other strip to explicitly link class status with ethnicity had both an ethnic creator and protagonist. *Bringing Up Father* was drawn for King Features by Irish comic artist George McManus and introduced in 1913. The comic was inspired by a play McManus had seen in St Louis some years before, called *The Rising Generation,* which concerned the 'trials and tribulations of an Irish labourer who'd struck it rich and moved to Fifth Avenue'.[73] The strip

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[72] 'Abie the Agent', *Portsmouth Daily Times*, 4 September 1928, 'U. S. Treasury Department Statistics of Income for 1928'.
[73] Goulart, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, p. 51.

featured a married couple, Jiggs and Maggie, with a grown up son and daughter. Jiggs (originally a hod-carrier) and Maggie (who used to work in a laundry) have at some point prior to the strip's beginning escaped their poor background and acquired an enormous fortune, catapulting them up the social ladder to the higher echelons of society. While it has been suggested that their fortune was the result of a winning lottery ticket, this is not referred to in any of the 4462 instances of the strip read for this research.[74]

As implied by the title, the strip's main focus is on Maggie's largely futile efforts to turn Jiggs into a society man, and her attempts to climb the social ladder and leave her working-class roots behind her. Of all the comics in this study, *Bringing Up Father* is the one that most explicitly addresses the issue of 'class passing', exploring the ideas of social mobility and status anxiety as it suggests time and again that no amount of money can alter Jiggs and Maggie's inherently working-class (and Irish) identity. As the years pass, Jiggs and Maggie do not age. While there is an element of serialisation, with some storylines lasting weeks or even months, *Bringing Up Father* does not fit quite the same sequential narrative mould as *The Gumps, Polly and Her Pals, The Bungle Family* and *Gasoline Alley*.

Broader Patterns

Taken as a whole, the comics in this study provide several interesting insights into the changing nature of the American class system in the early twentieth century, and the way that Americans

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[74] See for example, Eric Renner, *American Disguise* (Ann Arbor, 2007), p. 54; Jerry Harju, *Our World was in Black and White: More Colorful Essays of Growing Up North* (Ann Arbor, 2006), p. 13; *Social Problems*, (1980).

sought to navigate the rules of this changing society. Sometimes, the comics played a part in defining these rules. They did not provide some unilateral hegemonic discourse, aimed at controlling an uncritical mass public. Indeed, in many areas (such as the complicated question of what made a person middle class) the strips displayed an almost deliberate ambivalence, the subjectivity of the reader determining exactly what to read into a punchline. But in certain areas, like in the construction of middle-class gender identity, and in the satirical treatment of conspicuous consumption as a means of 'class passing,' the comics' message was clearer and was largely conservative. In their treatment of male occupational identity the strips reflected the wider social and economic transitions of turn-of-the-century America, weakening the one-dimensional connection between work and manliness and engaging with a wide variety of cultural prescriptions of masculinity. Yet for the female characters, the 'real life' widening of their social worlds to embrace the public sphere in the early 1900s was definitively undermined in the strips, with women's roles clearly and tightly defined based on their traditional role in the domestic sphere. The following sections explore how the comics navigated class discourse, concluding that while they perpetuated the mythology of the middle class as mainstream, they often challenged and satirised the associated expectation of unrestricted social mobility that was central to the idea of the American Dream.

Social hierarchies and mainstream American culture in the comics

The exploration of social hierarchies and mainstream American life in the comics that follows is broken down into three main areas: occupation and the workplace; middle-class 'culture,' consumerism and social mobility; and gender anxiety and marital relations in the middle-class

household. The three areas are inextricably linked, and the expectations of male and female gender roles have an overarching function in structuring the cultural construction of the public and private spheres and highlighting the fragility of social status. The strips studied here approach these areas in a variety of ways, and with different emphases. While it would be pleasing to be able to conclude that the strips demonstrate a clear, single ideological stance, or provide evidence of a specific set of social anxieties, the reality is more complex, reflecting the size of the source base and the diversity of its intended audience, as well as the differing perspectives of its many creators. The strips' treatment of social hierarchies is also testament to the complexity of the changes that were underfoot during this period.

More broadly, the strips explored the issue of social success and advancement in the context of the American Dream. In the modern consumer society of the early twentieth century, defining class boundaries became more complicated as items previously regarded as middle-class 'luxuries' became more widely accessible. Paired with the changes in the occupational structure of the middle-class, this led to a heightened interest in the related phenomena of 'class passing', conspicuous consumption and status anxiety. The characters in the world of the comics display a borderline obsessive desire to achieve, maintain, and flaunt social standing. On the one hand, lack of funds is not portrayed as a barrier to living a middle-class lifestyle, suggesting a degree of fluidity in a fundamentally open class structure. However at the same time, through satirical treatment of the social faux pas of characters who might be seen to be 'class passing', the very concept of an accessible, open middle-class is simultaneously undermined, with the suggestion that a person's rung on the social ladder is something more inherent, more fixed and fundamental, than consumer choices. This conflict, between the idea of an open society in which

social progress is possible through choices and achievements, and a closed society in which

status is inherent and ultimately immutable, has many similarities to the tensions in the period's

race thinking – something that is discussed at length in chapter three. In both regards, it is in

sharp relief to traditional interpretations of American freedom and equality of opportunity.

Occupation and male social identity
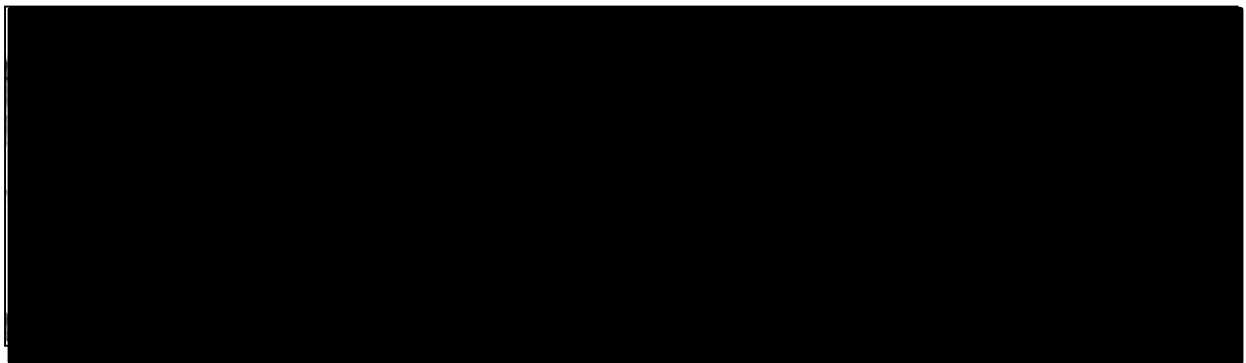
Figure 22: 'Doings of the Duffs', *Ottumwa Courier*, 17 May 1916.

Historically, the study of social structure has always begun at work. Most studies of the

formation of the American class system in the nineteenth century have foregrounded the

workplace as the most important area in which social position as class identity was defined and

understood. With the rapid industrialisation that took place after 1880, divisions within the

industrial workforce seemed to solidify, with the concept of a 'white collar' middle class and

'blue collar' working class central to accounts of the American class structure at the turn of the

twentieth century. While the middle class was comprised of workers, those workers were in

middle management or clerical positions, carrying out 'brain work' instead of manual labor. This

'new' middle class, which was fully established by the 1920s, included civil servants, trade union

officials, local government officers, technicians, white collar workers and minor executives, as well as thousands of clerical and sales people.[75] By 1930, these 'brain workers' made up 31% of the labor force, compared to just 10% in 1870.[76] White-collar status, with its higher income and lifestyle benefits, became equated with the idea of an 'ideal' American life more generally, shoring up the myth of the American Dream and accompanying American standard of living. Deborah Malmud, in her 2003 study of middle-class welfare in the early New Deal highlighted the enduring importance of occupation - and in particular the distinction between white and blue collar workers - in the definition of middle-class identity into the 1930s, arguing that 'New Deal administrators 'reinforced a vision… in which white-collar work was the most salient determination of middle-class status'.[77]

At the turn of the twentieth century, the link between occupation, social status and masculinity was extremely complicated. Accepted cultural ideals of middle-class manhood emphasising Victorian notions of self-restrained, moral manliness were challenged by the changing conditions of an industrialised society.[78] As self-employment among middle-class men dropped from 67% in 1870 to 37% by 1910, traditional sources of male power related to the middle-class work area seemed closed off, eroding the sense of manliness which had been so essential to nineteenth-century middle-class male identity.[79] This led to the broadening of social constructs of masculinity, as middle-class men adapted to shifting expectations in and of the workplace. This

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[75] Walter Nugent, 'Tocqueville, Marx, and American Class Structure', *Social Science History*, 12 (1988), p. 336.
[76] Anderson, 'The Language of Class in Twentieth-Century America', p. 353.
[77] Deborah C. Malmud, ''Who They Are - Or Were': Middle-Class Welfare in the Early New Deal', *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 151 (2003), p. 2023.
[78] Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880 - 1917* (Chicago, 1996), p. 11.
[79] Ibid., p. 12.

sense of flux is evident in the comics' treatment of men and work. The role of the workplace in the strips is multifaceted, differing between the sketch-based humour strips introduced in the 1900s (*Katzenjammer Kids, Happy Hooligan* and *Mutt and Jeff*), the family strips of the 1910s (*Polly and Her Pals, Doings of the Duffs, Gasoline Alley, The Bungle Family* and *The Gumps*) and the two strips by ethnic artists (*Abie the Agent* and *Bringing Up Father*). Finally, the Jazz Age comic *Tillie the Toiler,* the only strip to take place with the workplace as the primary setting, reimagined its significance as a social centre for women in the 1920s, rather than exploring the way in which white-collar work affected male – or female –experiences in the period.

The male characters across the comic page reflect the complexity of ideas about masculinity and male achievement in the newly industrialised nation, and the way in which gender norms are dissected in the strips highlights the changing way that American men sought to define their masculinity. Further, the specific use of gender types to derive humour hints at a wider preoccupation with ideals of masculinity (and indeed femininity), something that is then played out in the domestic setting. Over the course of the period, the strips variously engage with two types of working men. The first, the ridiculous entrepreneurs, are subversions of the self-made man model, who seek to make their fortunes through various far-fetched endeavours and hare-brained schemes. The second group is made up of white-collar middle-managers whose unassuming and steady occupational status remains largely in the background. While several of the strips' protagonists seek to fulfil a rags-to-riches model, they are not usually successful, and their employment status is not explicitly linked to their position at home or their social status until the later 1920s, when holding down an office job became the status quo across the majority of the comics studied, and is given more attention in the strips.

The family strips of the 1910s rarely used the workplace as a setting, and the occupation of the male head of the family was at best a secondary or tertiary determinate of their social and personal status. In only two of the six strips set in a middle-class family did the patriarch hold down a steady job: Tom (and later Wilbur) Duff and Sam Perkins (*Polly*) were employed in non-specific managerial roles, in office settings. Neither loses his job, but they are seen at work only occasionally, with the majority of the strips set with them at home or in social spaces - presumably at weekends or during the evening. In only one out of the 3100 individual strips of *Polly and Her Pals* studied is Pa's position as a middle-manager linked to the family's social standing: in 1918, Polly complains that Delicia, whose father is a wealthy farmer, will get new gowns this year, whereas she Polly will not, since her father is on a salary.[80] The office setting is used sparingly in both strips. Only around 35 out of 3100 *Polly* strips studied take place in, or concern, the employment of the male characters, which equates to just over 1% of the sample. There are more strips centred on golf (40 in total) than on Sam's job. A slightly higher proportion of the *Duffs* strips - just over 2% - engage with male occupation, though several of these relate to the dynamic between Tom, a pretty - but incompetent - stenographer, and Tom's jealous wife Helen.

The connection between masculinity, class and occupation is severed more decisively in *The Gumps*, *Gasoline Alley* and *The Bungle Family*. It is unclear for most of the 1910s and 1920s whether the main male character in these strips even has a job. While both George Bungle and

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[80] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times*, 17 March 1918.

Andy Gump wear suits and hats and are often absent from the home setting during the day, there is no specific reference to an office or workplace in either until the late 1920s. In 1925 George Bungle tries and fails to get a job and then begins the first of a series of nonsensical office roles in 1928.[81] That same year, Andy Gump (having lost a fortune on the stock exchange) tries several jobs, doing manual labour, selling books, working at a theater and then for a very brief stint as a freight handler, before he is rescued by a handout from Uncle Bim.[82] *Gasoline Alley*'s Walt Wallet makes the move into the white-collar world, taking a job as an officer manager at Wicker Furniture Company after a decade of tinkering with cars.[83] Whether the mechanic work is his profession or something he does as a hobby is never explained. The only workplace setting for a strip, *Tillie the Toiler's* office is framed less as a place of business than a social space for Tillie to flirt with the various men that visit the office. Tillie's colleague and the strip's main male character - Clarence "Mac" MacDougal – is, much like *Abie the Agent,* frequently passed over by Tillie in favour of more attractive personalities, his success in the workplace doing him absolutely no favours. Tillie herself has no problem getting or keeping employment, despite her feckless nature, low skill level and workshy attitude.

Harry Herschfield's *Abie the Agent* is the only strip to seriously and explicitly explore the issues and tensions of male working identity before the late 1920s, and does so outside the domestic, suburban setting of the family strips. Abe works tirelessly to keep up with the demand of his

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[81] These include working in a matchmaking office and acting as a financial adviser, where his bosses' strategy is to do the opposite of what he suggests. See 'The Bungle Family', *Lincoln Star* (30 May 1925, 13 June 1925, 20 June 1925), *Canton Daily News* (26 July 1928, 27 July 1928, 28 July 1928, 4 August 1928).
[82] 'The Gumps', *New Castle News* (8 February 1928, 25 February 1928, 9 April 1928), *Canton Daily News*, 8 March 1928).
[83] 'Gasoline Alley', *Mansfield News*, 10 January 1928.

lifestyle, constantly worrying about whether he is making enough money. The strip, which takes place in an urban environment – predominantly in public and not private spaces – often foregrounds Abe's workplace as the setting for the day's gag, particularly in his early career as a salesman for the Complex Auto Company (a job he returns to several times throughout his career on the page) and when he runs a movie theater.[84] Frustrations at poor sales and demanding customers, alongside Abe's inventive and unique approach to business, provide punchlines for the strip all the way from its inception in 1914 to the end of this study, although instances of workplace-based humour are considerably more frequent in the earlier years of the strip. Abe clearly quantifies success at work with the size of his income, often trying to figure out what would sound more impressive: telling people what he earns in a week, a month, or a year.[85] While Abe does achieve moderate business success, his efforts in the workplace are not a passport to riches, or to the respect of his peers. He is frequently depicted as a social outcast at the club, with other members talking about him behind his back. His social ineptitude means that, as he laments to himself, regardless of his career success and benevolence towards charitable causes, he will forevermore be known as 'Abe the finger-bowl drinker'.[86]

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[84] Abe's job at the Complex Auto Company is the central storyline of early strips, as he is seen taking potential buyers out for test drives. See (among others) 'Abie the Agent', *El Paso Herald,* 7 February 1914. By 1918, he is in charge of the OK movie theater. See 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times* (11 April 1918, 15 April 1918, 16 April 1918).

[85] See 'Abie the Agent', *Madison Capital Times,* 14 February 1924, *Portsmouth Daily Times,* 11 March 1926.

[86] Abie the Agent, *Washington Times*, 11 January 1918. For a fuller discussion, see my MA dissertation, which argues that Harry Hershfield wanted to create a character in Abe that countered the uncomplimentary anti-Semitic stereotypes depicting Jews in the Shylock tradition. This required creating a protagonist that was sympathetic but not heroic, and who operated within the boundaries set by the ethnic stereotype of the Jewish businessman of the vaudeville stage and popular press. Hilary Fraser, 'Immigrants, Ethnic Humour and the Newspaper Comic Strip, 1913 – 1930', MA thesis, University of Sheffield, (Summer 2012).

The comics' treatment of occupation and male achievement ultimately problematised the connection between effort in the workplace and social advancement. Men with steady jobs, like Samuel Perkins, Tom Duff, Walt Wallet and Abe Kabibble did not acquire great riches and their white collar status afforded them no particular social prestige or respect from their peers. Jill Kasen, in a 1980 study of the treatment of occupation – and particularly the myth of the self-made man – in comics published by the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* between 1925 and 1975, argued that it was not until after World War Two that comic culture really embraced the idea of professionalism, something that is borne out by the lack of prestige attached to white collar work in the strips in this study.[87] However, several of the strips in this study also satirized the concept of the self-made man and in particular its twentieth-century incarnation, who sought to expedite the process of going from rags to riches by capitalizing on the get rich schemes of the Roaring Twenties.

The self-made man and the get rich quick scheme

The idea of the self-made man is an important ideological construction, often seen as a uniquely American cultural product, bound up with the dominant idea of the possibilities of expressive individualism in a society unbound (for whites at least) by inherited status. Personified by the rags to riches idiom and made famous by the dime novels by Horatio Alger, the narrative goes that boys born into any walk of American life can overcome the obstacles they encounter to

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[87] Jill Kasen, 'Whither the Self-Made Man? Comic Culture and the Crisis of Legitimation in the United States', *Social Problems*, 28 (December 1980).

achieve success in material and social terms. As Paul Heike has argued, the idea of the self-made

man is also crucial to the utopian vision of the classless American society or at least the idea that

social mobility is so great as to render the class system largely irrelevant.[88] The combined tropes

of the self-made man and the possibilities of upward mobility shore up the belief in America as a

land of opportunity, and specifically of equality of opportunity regardless of background.

Judy Hilkey's examination of success manuals in Gilded Age America identifies a shift in focus

in the later nineteenth century. She concludes that, as a result of changes in the relations of work,

home, and family brought about by industrialization and urbanization, traditional male identities

as providers, protectors and patriarchs were either diminished or transformed, with the values of

entrepreneurship and money-making taking centre stage.[89] However, by the turn of the twentieth

century, the prominence of the self-made man in popular culture had dwindled somewhat, as

Tom Pendergast has shown in his study of American magazines from 1900-1950.[90] Modern

masculinity in an industrial, consumer society bound together a variety of cultural prescriptions

and images, some of them potentially contradictory, as a means of providing masculine

legitimation in a period where traditional male gender identity faced several challenges.

Thanks to a buoyant and rapidly growing economy after World War One, America appeared to

offer ample opportunities to 'get rich quick' to those with cash to invest and who were willing to

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[88] Heike Paul, 'Expressive Individualism and the Myth of the Self-Made Man', in 'Expressive Individualism and the Myth of the Self-Made Man', *The Myths That Made America* (2014), p. 368.
[89] Judy Hilkey, *Character Is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), pp. 142–143.
[90] Tom Pendergast, *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture, 1900-1950* (Columbia, Mo., 2000), p. 267.

take a risk on either the booming real estate market or the stock exchange. In a drive to rejuvenate Florida, a massive national advertising campaign helped to drive a land rush, which had gained significant momentum by 1922.[91] Thousands of Americans made down-payments on investment properties and borrowed the rest of the money, intending to resell at a profit as prices rose. Several comics engaged with this new practice: in 1925 (at the height of the boom) Mutt and Jeff go to Florida, with Jeff's far-fetched expectations of the profits he might make providing humour in several strips.[92] George Bungle makes a fortune out of a lucky real estate deal in the same year.[93] In 1926, *The Gumps, Gasoline Alley* and *Mutt and Jeff* all devote several strips to the subject.[94] The early 1920s also saw the stock market take a steady upward climb.[95] The idea of buy low, sell high also featured prominently in the comics in this period, despite the fact that only around 2.5% of Americans actually invested in the stock market in the 1920s. *The Gumps, Gasoline Alley, The Bungle Family* and *Tillie the Toiler* all ran extended storylines on the fortunes of the protagonists' investments between 1920 and the crash of 1929.[96] Despite the fact that, in reality, the Roaring 20s were a time of wealth for a fairly limited few, at a superficial level the strips certainly seemed to perpetuate the idea of the possibility of rapid social mobility for low- and middle-income Americans willing to invest.

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[91] Edmund Lindop, *America in the 1920s* (Minneapolis, 2009), p. 53.
[92] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Portsmouth Daily Times* (various, January – February 1925).
[93] 'The Bungle Family', 3 July 1925.
[94] See 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star,* 24 August 1926, 'Gasoline Alley', *Charleston Daily Mail* (7 January 1926, 16 January 1926), 'Mutt and Jeff', *Portsmouth Daily Times,* 27 February 1926.
[95] Lindop, *America in the 1920s*, p. 54.
96 See 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Public Ledger* (10 March 1920, 15 March 1920, 17 March 1920, 19 March 1920, 23 March 1920, 3 April 1920, 13 May 1920), 'Gasoline Alley', *Massillon Evening Independent,* 5 December 1928, *Bakersfield Californian,* 29 December 1928, 'The Bungle Family', *Sandusky Register* (7, 10, 13, 14, 17, 19, 20, 21st, 24, 26, 28 September 1929), 'Tillie the Toiler', *Steubenville Herald Star* (19, 20, 23 October, 3, 6, 10, 13, 18, 19 December 1925).

While the comics are subject to multiple readings, those in this study (particularly *The Gumps*, *The Bungle Family, Mutt and Jeff* and *Bringing Up Father*) actually treated the concept of 'get rich quick' in a deeply satirical fashion. This contrasts with Kasen's analysis, which was based on 'coding' the occupations of all characters in the strips she studied. She suggested that in the Roaring 1920s and even into the Depression-racked 1930s, comic reality flaunted the self-made man: 'characters in these first samples founded and staffed corporations, fashioned spas and mineral water companies out of water holes, and initiated turkey farms and restaurants. Professionals were rare intruders into this free enterprise reality of investment and profit, a reality which emphasized the right to excel over one's neighbours'.[97] But her interpretation does not take into account the comics' satirical treatment of the get-rich-quick storylines. While male characters in several of the comics were shown as engaging in the world of free enterprise that Kasen describes, they rarely do so successfully, and their moneymaking schemes are usually laughable, not laudable, endeavours. Andy Gump is mocked relentlessly by his wife for his attempts to get rich by investing in carp caviar and then mountain canaries in 1920, with Min chiding him for sitting back and waiting for his fortune to land in his lap (see figure 23 below). George Bungle drives himself mad trying to make a fortune out of fur on a guinea pig ranch in 1929, and Mutt's constant attempts to make a quick buck lead Jeff to reflect that rags to riches success stories probably only existed before cash registers.[98] Furthermore, Kasen's analysis gives equal weight to the professions of the main characters in the strips (whose actions are used to construct humour) and subsidiary characters, like the town doctor or the country judge, whose

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[97] Kasen, 'Whither the Self-Made Man?', p. 134.
[98] 'The Bungle Family', *Sandusky Register,* 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27 February 1929, 2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 13, 21, 26, 27, 28, 29 March, 3, 12, 13, 20, 23, 24, April 1929), 'Mutt and Jeff', *Boston Globe*, 12 March 1920.

positions serve to add cultural context to a scene in much the same way as might a public building.

Figure 23: The Gumps, Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger, 5 November 1920

One might conclude that the strips' satirical treatment of attempts by its characters to cut corners and acquire wealth through quick schemes, land deals and handouts is evidence of the comics' support for the more traditional values of hard work and individual initiative. David Welky, in his 2010 book on print culture in the Depression concludes just that. He argues that *The Gumps* 'reaffirmed America's uniqueness and the continuing viability of the American Dream. It echoed Franklin's and Alger's focus on stability and middle-class respectability over money.'[99] To Welky, the strip reiterated its creator Sidney Smith's personal beliefs, which he wrote about publicly, that success only comes from years of 'plugging and building'.[100] Welky's analysis of the strip in the late 1930s and 1940s (later than the current study) certainly supports this interpretation, as he highlights the extent to which Uncle Bim, the Gumps' billionaire uncle, is cast in the Horatio Alger rags to riches model. His evidence is compelling: Bim's rags-to-riches

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[99] David Welky, Everything Was Better in America: Print Culture in the Great Depression (Chicago, 2010), p. 69.
[100] Ibid., p. 70.

background is explained in one strip, in which he declares that his 'journey from dinner pail to dinner jacket… made the rocky road to Dublin look like a billiard table'.[101] Furthermore, in the midst of the Depression years, Bim loses his entire fortune, but, thanks to hard work and perseverance, builds up another one, going from unemployed to grocery clerk back to billionaire and 'restoring the efficacy… of the American Dream'.[102]

However, Welky's interpretation and the evidence he finds seems to have been unique to the later Depression era. While the *Gumps* of the 1920s and even early 1930s undoubtedly satirized the notion of get rich quick schemes, there was no explicit support or encouragement for the idea of the self-made man either. The source of Bim's fortune is not revealed in the period of this study, with his wealth ultimately serving as a reinforcement of the idea that the lack of a job is not necessarily a barrier to a good life. Andy and Min (as well as the wider ensemble of characters) rely on occasional handouts from their rich uncle, hoping too that their son Chester will be the sole heir to Bim's fortune and protecting his inheritance from the various fortune-seeking women that threaten to muscle in on their cash-cow. Despite living from week to week much of the time, Andy's job - or lack of a job - is never really foregrounded, and when times get really tough Bim is always there to bail them out.

A level of disconnect between the acquisition of money and the ability to spend it is common in the strips of this period, which embraced the opportunities of a consumer society. The idea that money - and jobs – were easy come, easy go, is a constant across all the strips, with the notable

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[101] Ibid., p. 73.
[102] Ibid.

exception of *Abie the Agent*. In every other strip, the lack of a permanent job does not preclude a middle-class lifestyle. In *Gasoline Alley*, Walt and the guys occasionally discuss money troubles such as not being able to afford luxuries like a chauffeur or an Oriental rug.[103] But a lack of funds does not preclude Walt from taking in and adopting baby Skeezix or hiring a full time housekeeper to raise him. For most of the strip, the source of Walt's income is unknown, until his move to Wicker Furniture in 1928 and the family's subsequent inheritance of a large fortune from Skeezix's biological father.[104] In the other comics, income is associated more with luck - and handouts - than the idea of working for a living. For Jo and George Bungle, occasional money worries do not really threaten their lifestyle, except during one of George's amnesia episodes, when Jo falls behind with the bills in his absence.[105] Between plots to persuade rich distant Bungle relatives to hand over lump sums and marry their daughter Peggy to a local millionaire, the pair do not seem to spend much time worrying about money until the 1928 job hunt. Indeed, after George's failed efforts to find work in 1925, the family manages to amass a small fortune in a real estate deal, enabling the strip to continue much as before.[106]

Bringing Up Father, while not a family strip in quite the same mould as the others discussed, also explicitly disconnects the concepts of working and lifestyle. It is clear that Jiggs and Maggie have moved several rungs up the social ladder, having gone from the Irish 'slums' to enjoying an arguably upper class position among 'society people'. It is, though, never entirely clear where the money came from to facilitate this dramatic social climbing. Though Jiggs does seem to run an

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[103] 'Gasoline Alley', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 9 October 1919.
[104] 'Gasoline Alley', *Bakersfield Californian*, 1 July 1929.
[105] 'The Bungle Family', *Lincoln Star*, 16 April 1926.
[106] 'The Bungle Family', *Lincoln Star,* 26 June 1925.

office, where he is seen snoozing or flirting with book selling agents at various points, his job - which he leaves for months at a time to go on lavish trips with Maggie – is not the source of their fortune. In November 1923, Jiggs goes bankrupt after making a poor investment - but within ten days they have inherited a million dollars from a distant relative of Maggie's, and all is well again.[107]

Indeed, all ten strips are united across the entire 35 year period by their treatment of poverty as a temporary or transitional state and one that does not necessarily create a barrier to achieving a lifestyle rich in 'middle-class' comforts. Quite unlike the editorial cartoons of the later nineteenth century, the funny papers glossed over the reality of life for the industrial working poor, with manual labourers and service personnel (except for domestic servants) appearing solely as a means of shoring up the middle classness of the strips' main characters. Jiggs' old cronies in *Bringing Up Father* are identified largely by their positions as manual and service workers; Jiggs' affinity with them instead of Maggie's society friends are a constant source of frustration for her and an amusement for us. Furthermore, by decentralising the workplace and normalising the idea of living week-to-week, the comics created an image of a society with shared social experiences that were not strictly determined by or understood in terms of job position.

Individual examples of many of the comics in this study might suggest that the comics celebrated the idea of an open class structure, with entry to the desirable (and seemingly inclusive and broad

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[107] Most popular descriptions of *Bringing Up Father* suggest that Jiggs and Maggie had amassed their sizeable fortune through a winning lottery ticket, but this explanation was never offered by George McManus, who once attributed it to a successful scheme selling bricks to a character from another comic strip, another time as the result of striking up a friendship with a generous – and very successful – fellow who gave Jiggs a dime every time he made a thousand dollars himself.

middle class) not limited by occupation. Furthermore, social mobility was seemingly made easy by the existence of numerous opportunities to acquire wealth, in a country where the American Dream of prosperity and economic advance was more apparent than ever before. Even in the Depression years, the connection between occupation, income and expenditure was not linear, and the reality of poverty was obscured on the comics page. However, when the comics are examined as a group and over a number of years, it is clear that their message is more complicated, and their potential readings multifaceted. The strips' treatment of masculine working identity reflected the fact that this was an era where male gender roles were shifting, reflecting changes in the industrial workforce. Furthermore, the comics complicated the connection between working and the other markers of social position (clothing, possessions, activities), resulting in a complex set of cultural contradictions surrounding the relevance of the American Dream to the reality of twentieth-century American life.

Kitchen sink drama: marital relations and gender identity in the middle class home

> The married men are all in a chronic state of subjection to their wives and their wives' mothers and their being at "the club" or "the lodge". During the short periods when the husbands and wives are in accord they are engaged in battling with the servant-girl question.
>
> ~ Frederick Burr Opper, creator of *Happy Hooligan*, in an article entitled 'Random Readings… Caricature Country', dated June 1901.

Frederick Burr Opper's tongue-in-cheek 1901 description of the domestic setup in 'Caricature Country', as he termed it, was an extraordinarily accurate description of the world for the mainstream Americans depicted on the comics page over the following 35 years. With the connection between occupation and social status largely sidelined in the strips, the middle-class home, and its related issues, provided the primary location of the majority of the comics from around 1912. The question of male-female relationships, and especially the balance of power within the home, was integral to the 'kitchen-sink' drama of the domestic strips. The expanding role of women in the public sphere over the course of this period was one of several social changes that undermined the basis for Victorian gender norms and posed a threat to masculine self-definition in the Progressive period. Furthermore, expressions of class and gender were inextricably linked, with portrayal of class boundaries often depicted in gendered terms.

Social interest in, and anxiety over, the reordering of gender hierarchies shaped the depiction of the middle-class household and the portrayal of male-female relations in the strips in a myriad ways. It would be possible to interpret the focus on gender relations – and the heightened incidence of jokes about the 'wrong' type of women in the period leading up to the passing of the nineteenth amendment in 1920 – in a number of ways. One must assume that the domestic dynamics portrayed in the strips had some element of social truth, at least insofar as they represented widespread perceptions of social reality; the appeal of the newspaper comic strip was in its exaggerated, but widely recognisable, familiarity.[108] In a period where traditional gender roles were in flux, the strips seemed to act as a safety valve, enabling concerns about the

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[108] Roger Penn Cuff, 'The American Editorial Cartoon-A Critical Historical Sketch', *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 19 (October 1945), p. 87.

increased role of women in the public sphere, and the changing role of men at work and at home, to be played out on the page. While the female characters were undoubtedly portrayed as the voices of authority in the middle-class home, this ultimately served to reinforce the traditional separation of spheres and shore up patriarchal, gender-based social hierarchies, rather than championing increased freedoms for women in wider society.

More commonly associated with British theatre after World War Two, the term 'kitchen sink drama' or 'kitchen sink realism' has been used to refer, loosely, to the depiction of everyday family life in popular culture. In the British postwar concept, the genre was strongly associated with the trials and tribulations of the working classes, and was the cultural precursor to the rise of the soap opera in the 1980s. In America, however, as Dorothy Chansky has demonstrated in her recent book *Kitchen Sink Realisms: Domestic Labor, Dining, and Drama in American Theater*, the workings of ordinary households had been appearing in plays since the late nineteenth century.[109] Between 1918 and the advent of the Depression, argues Chansky, 'domestic labor was front and centre in American theater as a topic in its own right'.[110] Significantly, she asserts, in occurring to coincide with the suffrage movement, the domestic setting was used as a means of exploring not just the woman's place within the home but also to consider her role in wider society. Not as narrowly associated with the working-class household in American as in the British tradition, the domestic setting that Chansky's work explores is one that a wide cross-section of Americans could have related to.

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[109] Dorothy Chansky, *Kitchen Sink Realisms: Domestic Labor, Dining, and Drama in American Theatre* (Iowa City, 2015), p. 1.
[110] Ibid, p. 30.

The kitchen sink – as a symbol of the domestic sphere and nexus of American family life – was central to the development of the syndicated comic strip from the introduction of *Polly and Her Pals* in 1912. The earlier strips, such as *Mutt and Jeff* and *Happy Hooligan,* began to engage with domestic topics but remained set in a largely public locale. Indeed, as suggested by their titles, both strips feature reasonably young male protagonists whose escapades take them to various locations in America and further afield. Happy does pursue a female love interest (Suzanne) from 1908 through to their eventual marriage in June 1916, but their pairing does not evolve the strip into a domestic drama. After a few escapades together, they eventually divorce in 1930, seemingly never having set up home together.[111] Similarly, the protagonists in *Mutt and Jeff,* a pair of feckless 'tinhorns' are largely unfettered by female relations. It is revealed in December 1910 that Mutt does have an estranged wife (Mrs. Mutt) and son (Cicero).[112] Mutt does not live with them or support his wife. After the Mutts reconcile in 1912, the domestic setting gains importance and marriage – in particular the common trope of the disappointing husband and violent, temperamental wife – is used more frequently as a topic in the strip.[113] This shift towards the domestic is also evident in *The Katzenjammer Kids*, whose setting (despite regular detours into the jungle or onto pirate ships) becomes noticeably more middle class from around 1915.

Changing working patterns impacted male gender identity in the Victorian Era, as the rise of white-collar working enabled men to spend more time at home.[114] Margaret Mash describes a 'cult of masculine domesticity' in which contented, middle-class suburban fathers drew a sense

[111] 'Happy Hooligan', *Amarillo Sunday News Globe,* 5 January 1930.
[112] 'Mutt and Jeff', *El Paso Herald,* 26 December 1910.
[113] See for instance, 'Mutt and Jeff', *Lima News,* 19 November 1930.
[114] Margaret Mash, 'Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity 1870-1915', in Mark Carnes and Clyde Griffen, *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago, 1990), p. 112.

of masculine pride from their increased responsibility for some of the day-to-day tasks of bringing up children, and proactively spent more time at home with their wives than they did with male workmates or friends. Mash argues that 'while he might not dust the mantel or make the bed except in special circumstances, he would take a significantly greater interest in the details of running the household and caring for the children than this father had been expected to do'.[115] This perspective, first expressed by female advice-givers around the 1890s, empowered women in the home to raise expectations about their husbands' behaviour.[116] The relationship between husbands and wives came under greater scrutiny, with advice literature promoting the ideal of the companionate marriage, in which men and women both held new roles.[117] Mash argues that the 'cultural chasm' between the mid-nineteenth century middle-class home and its early twentieth-century counterpart was largely due to the shift in composition of the middle class, and the rise of white-collar jobs that enabled husbands to focus more of their attention on their role in the home.[118]

The comic strips in this study both built up and knocked down Mash's 'cult of masculine domesticity', with the cultural construction of domesticity and marital relations in the suburban comics demonstrating both a change in domestic dynamics and the challenges that this shift created. The male heads of households in the strips all take an active interest in the raising of their children, from deciding on their names, having them weighed, tracking milestones and meeting their teachers. The epitome of the domesticated male, *Gasoline Alley's* Walt Wallet, is a

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[115] Mash, 'Suburban Men', p. 112.
[116] Ibid., p. 115.
[117] Ibid., p. 117.
[118] Ibid, pp. 117–120.

single father to baby Skeezix for five years after his arrival, until his marriage to Phylis Blossom in 1926.[119] With the help of a live-in maid, Walt adopts the role of both mother and father to Skeezix, tending to his every need. As fathers, the men of the comics supplement lived up to the standard outlined by Mash and the advice literature she studied, and appear to fulfil a modern notion of domestic manhood. The placement of the male characters in the domestic sphere across the strips certainly suggests a general blurring of the boundaries between the male public sphere and the female sphere of domesticity.

However, while the men and women of the comic supplement co-existed in the household, they rarely did so peacefully. The comics' focus on marital discord in this period suggests a societal preoccupation with gender relations within the house; as Mary Ryan has argued more widely, 'any cultural construct that achieved such popularity bore some semblance to social reality.'[120] While the men in the strips existed largely in the domestic sphere, cartoonists continued to depict women as domestic managers. Arguments over who was to blame for a lack of funds - the husband for failing to bring in enough money or the wife for irresponsible spending - were usually won by the wives. No amount of effort in the home counterbalanced a husband's inability to fund this season's new dresses, should funds fall short. With considerable consistency across the duration of this study, the comics undermined rather than encouraged the notion of domesticated masculinity and reinforced the idea that women were inherently suited to – and superior at – homemaking.

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[119] 'Walt Marries in Gasoline Alley', *Charleston Daily Mail* (25 June 1926).
[120] Mary P. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790 - 1865 (Cambridge, 1998), p. 191.
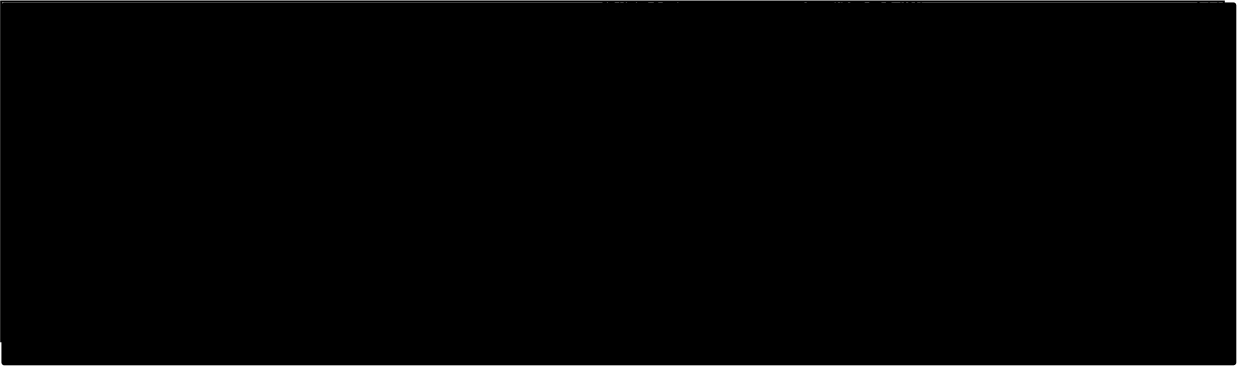
Figure 24: 'Doings of the Duffs', *Iowa City Press Citizen*, 29 March 1923.

Arguably the defining feature of the strips in the 1910s and 1920s was their focus on the day-to-day realities of marriage in the suburban home. Far from portraying a nation of contented housewives happily discussing curtain choices with domesticated husbands, the strips focused on the antagonistic relationship between men and women who, in each other's eyes, both fell short of the expected standard.[121] Men will generally do anything to avoid participating in household maintenance, even going as far as getting themselves arrested to avoid household chores.[122] When not complaining about being asked to help their wives at home, the men can often be found professing that they can do a better job themselves. In a 1918 panel entitled 'Of Course, We Men Are Independent', Sidney Smith depicts a common scene: Andy Gump, finding that Min has not sewn up the lining of his jacket, complains that 'she never takes care of anything'. He decides to do it himself, ranting to himself that next time he gets married, he will find a wife who can sew properly. The next frame sees Andy destroying the sewing machine and getting into

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[121] The 'labor shortage' of the first decades of the twentieth century, which no doubt contributed to a degree of marital discord as middle-class women struggling to find good quality help, is documented in David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (Chicago, 1981).
[122] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Boston Sunday Globe*, 29 October 1922.

a muddle. Finally, the last frame ends with him admitting defeat, and calling for help as he so often does: 'Oh Min!'[123] Arguments over household expenses, the standard of housekeeping and the willingness of the male characters to help out in the home dominate the suburban strips in the late 1910s and early 1920s. In almost every case, the husband 'loses' - across all the strips, the woman's place as the domestic head of the household is maintained, with husbands lampooned for either not doing enough, trying but doing it badly, or attempting to get too involved in decision-making.[124]

Several strips also explored the possibility of men and women swapping roles, and of men left to manage domestic duties while wives went away, with catastrophic failure the result every time. The earliest example appears in 1915, when Samuel Perkins (Pa) decides to take over the household finances in *Polly and Her Pals*.[125] Within a week, he has forgotten to pay for the piano, got behind on the rent and failed to pay the insurance premium. His financial management is so poor that the family has to eat nothing but tinned tomatoes as he has used up all the housekeeping money. After five days, Pa decides it would be best for Ma to take back the reins, but is concerned about admitting defeat and losing his 'prestige'.[126] Fourteen years later and the two swap roles again, with Pa taking over managing the home and Ma going out to work. Where Ma Perkins thrives in the workplace, running the entire office and actually bringing in far more business than her husband, Pa cannot even get the two 'domestics' to do what he wants.[127]

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[123] 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 22 April 1918.
[124] This was a common theme across several strips: The Gumps, Doings of the Duffs, Polly and Her Pals and Bringing Up Father.
[125] 'Polly and Her Pals', *South Bend News Times,* 11 January 1915.
[126] 'Polly and Her Pals', various, 11 – 16 January 1915.
[127] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Sandusky Register,* 17 November 1929.

Female management of the household finances is a given, with some of the male characters reduced to asking for an allowance from their wives.[128] When money is tight, it is the men of the house who go without new clothes and their frequent protestations about their wives' excessive expenditure are often countered with examples of their own financial irresponsibility.[129]

There are subtle differences in the treatment of marital relations across the different genres of strip. In the suburban family strips, the female characters rule the roost while the men follow orders (often complaining loudly). Male domestic input, and any attempt to exert control over their partners in the domestic sphere, is ridiculed and ultimately unsuccessful.[130] Perhaps in order to avoid controversy, physical violence between spouses is never featured, with bickering the standard means of working out disputes. In *Bringing Up Father* and *Mutt and Jeff,* however, the relationship between men and women is more physical, with interactions tending towards the carnivalesque. Rather than exploring the day-to-day realities of the household, the strips offer an exaggerated look at marital relations reminiscent of the Punch and Judy tradition. In 1919 Jiggs, who received hundreds of beatings from Maggie over the duration of his comic's career, makes several unsuccessful attempts to assert his authority over his wife, to no avail. When he encounters other men who are the bosses in their households, he asks them for advice or suggestions on how to tame Maggie; he takes a correspondence course in exerting authority and in 1923 he gives a medal to a man when he hears him talking back to his wife.[131] The wives in

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[128] See for instance 'Bringing Up Father', *El Paso Herald,* 7 May 1918.
[129] See for instance 'The Gumps', *Marion Star,* 18 January 1931.
[130] See in particular 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* (3 January 1920, 11 January 1921), 'The Gumps', *Marion Star,* 25 May 1929, 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 19 May 1918, *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger,* 3rd May 1919, 'Polly and Her Pals', *East Liverpool Review Tribune,* 27 November 1935.
[131] 'Bringing Up Father', *Harrisburg Telegraph,* 12 December 1916, *El Paso Herald* (13 April 1918, 17 April 1918, 21 May 1918, 3 June 1918, 3 March 1919, 20 March 1919, 31 March 1919, 2 April 1919, 3 April 1919, 5 April 1919, 25 April 1919).

these strips dominate their husbands completely, from controlling the choices made in the household to dictating how, and with whom, their husbands spend their spare time. In both strips, the male characters are forced to come up with increasingly inventive excuses - and even escape plans - to leave the house without permission, often sneaking back in quietly to try and avoid the inevitable beating with a rolling pin from an angry wife lying in wait in the shadows.[132]

Figure 25: 'Mutt and Jeff, *Ada Evening News*, 18 January 1927.

The sheer quantity of strips focusing on marital relations and gender hierarchies in the domestic sphere demonstrate that, at the very least, comic artists and editors recognized that this was a topic of interest to their audience. We might also infer that, considering the consistency with which the themes are used across the strip, the social preoccupation with these issues stretched across a wide cross section of American society. The exact nature of the preoccupation is open to interpretation, which is undoubtedly a subjective process. One could argue that the strips'

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[132] There are many examples, among others see 'Bringing Up Father', *Richmond Times Dispatch,* 14 June 1913, 'Mutt and Jeff', *Boston Sunday Globe,* 8 January 1922. In a single instance, Ma Perkins awaits Pa with a rolling pin after he sneaks out: 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 20 June 1922.

increasing focus on domestic issues, and frequent examples of female dominance within the home, presented a pro-female viewpoint and recognised female empowerment, in line with the wider social developments leading to the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. The consistent domestic domination of men by women might alternatively be seen as evidence of male fears about their role in the domestic sphere, in an era when, as Gail Bederman (among others) has argued, economically-based changes in middle-class culture and the decline of the self-made man were eroding the sense of manliness which had been so essential to male identity in the Gilded Era.[133] However, the strips actually served to reinforce traditional gender hierarchies, as comedy preserved the idea of women as wives and mothers defined by their role at home. While the relationships between the male and female characters differed between the different comics, male ineptitude at home only served to confirm the idea that this was a female domain, with the two-dimensional portrayal of women as either scorned spinsters or middle-class wives serving to shore up this worldview.

Furthermore, the construction of caricatured white male characters that fulfilled a joke role, often in relation to their wives, is more likely to have demonstrated a level of social ease with their role in the world than discomfort. In 1915, a book published by Reverend David Mc. Rae described the American penchant for self-deprecating humour, noting that 'if America laughs a good deal even at herself, it is partly because she feels that she can afford to do it'.[134] This observation is particularly pertinent here, given that every single strip in this study was created by one or more white men. While both men and women were subject to gender-based mockery in

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[133] Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, p. 14.
[134] Rev. David McRae, *National Humour – Scottish – English – Irish – Welsh – Cockney – American* (Paisley, 1915), p. 357.

the strips, the nature of that mockery served to hold up a fundamentally conservative view of the roles of men and women in a middle-class society, ultimately undermining the social and political advances made by women in the public sphere.

The women of the comics page

The 35-year period that this study encompasses brought about large-scale change for American women. From around the 1890s, the term 'New Woman' had become part of the popular vernacular, referring to a generation of women who challenged gender norms and structures with a new public presence in politics, the workplace and politics.[135] Several different versions of the 'New Woman' existed, from the middle-class 'Gibson Girl', a kind of modern-day debutante who appeared in the printed media at the end of the nineteenth century, to the 1920s flapper.[136] America's involvement in World War One opened up many opportunities to women, who gained new skills filling the employment shortage left behind when men left for the front. As a result, as Lucy Bland has shown, many returning veterans were 'appalled to find that the women they had left behind were *not* as they had left them: the women had gained in confidence, were sometimes insubordinate, had undertaken so-called men's work during the war, [and] had frequently fared well on their own'.[137] In the following decade, (white) women would experience many new freedoms, including the right to vote. They embraced exciting new fashions, shrugging off past

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[135] Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, 'New Women in Early 20th-Century America', *Oxford Research Enclyclopedias* (Oxford, 2017).
[136] Ibid.
[137] Lucy Bland, *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* (Manchester, 2016), p. 3.

conventions that required 'proper' young ladies to have long hair, wear clothes that covered every inch of their skin and demur from wearing cosmetics.[138]

The comics' treatment of women was inextricably linked with its construction of middle-class identity, with female gender stereotypes taking on a distinctly 'classed' nature. Far from reflecting the increased public presence of American women in the period, the strips by and large contained them to the domestic sphere, with the majority of public appearances being social in nature. Their satirical treatment of the suffrage campaign, and the comparison of 'model' middle-class women with exaggerated (and much maligned) alternatives, combined with their construction of gender dynamics in the household to, ultimately, undermine the concept of the New Woman. They perpetuate the idea that the middle-class home was the centre of social stability, and the woman's place was as at the head of that home. In this respect, the comics reinforced conservative views on appropriate gender boundaries for middle class men and women, despite the significant changes that took place in American and elsewhere during this period.

Women's suffrage

The suffrage movement for voting rights for women was one political issue that did make its way onto the usually apolitical pages of the comics supplement, both through overt references to the feminist movement, and a more subtle shift in the portrayal of female characters. The movement first appears in the strips in 1909, when Happy Hooligan inadvertently interrupts a suffragettes'

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[138] Catherine Gourley, *Flappers and the New American Woman: Perceptions of Women from 1918 Through the 1920s* (Minneapolis, 2008), pp. 8–9.

meeting while chasing a lost dog.[139] He is beaten up by the angry women. A smattering of similar strips appear over the next half decade, with the suffragettes portrayed as violent and angry, and Happy as the unfortunate victim of their ire. This portrayal of the suffragettes as violent and denatured is a stark contrast to the Victorian views of female piety in a domestic sphere. This type of comparison was a common strategy of anti-suffragist propagandists, who highlighted that 'proper' middle-class women fulfilled roles as wives and mothers in tidy and clean homes, wore appropriate dresses and sported beautiful smiles: all things that women out campaigning for increased rights neglected. Anti-suffrage propaganda in both Britain and the United States focused on the Suffragettes' violence, lack of femininity (and even ugliness) and shortcomings as mothers. The idea of unmarried spinsters that would turn to campaigning to address their failure to find a man to love them was also a common theme.[140]

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[139] 'Happy Hooligan', *Salt Lake Herald*, 22 August 1909.
[140] Kenneth Florey, *American Woman Suffrage Postcards: A Study and Catalog* (Jefferson, N.C., 2016), p. 213.

Figure 26: Catherine H. Palczewski, Postcard Archive, University of Northern Iowa (undated).

The topic of the suffrage movement is used in both *Bringing Up Father* and *Polly and Her Pals* to explore the dynamics between the male and female characters from around 1915. The strips' fairly light-hearted treatment of the issue can be seen below, where Jiggs' diatribe on the idiocy of the suffrage movement is interrupted by Maggie returning home and immediately taking

charge of Jiggs.[141] A similar joke is used a year later in *Polly and Her Pals*, when Sam (Pa) is in the middle of a monologue about how the President should 'deal' with the suffragettes, and is knocked over by the suffrage banner that Aunt Maggie is carrying.[142] In both of these examples, it is the backwards, anti-suffrage stance of the male character that is the butt of the joke.

Figure 27: 'Bringing Up Father', *Richmond Times Dispatch,* 4 March 1916.

The suffrage movement is treated with irreverence in the comics, often linked explicitly to the role of women in the house. In the Perkins household, the girls are divided over the question, with Polly and Ma for women's suffrage and Aunt Maggie a militant suffrage opponent. When the three of them go out to their various suffrage/anti-suffrage meeting, their political activity is explicitly connected to their failure to fulfil their role at home, with Pa and Ashur left to do the washing up.[143] Significantly once the female characters in the strip had won the right to vote, none of them are seen doing so, although Polly and Ma do go off to register a few years later.[144] When Andy Gump stands for office in 1922, he appeals to the female vote and is elected largely

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[141] 'Bringing Up Father', *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 4 March 1916.
[142] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times*, 16 July 1917.
[143] 'Polly and Her Pals', *South Bend Times*, 11 March 1915.
[144] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Madison Capital Times,* 15 October 1923.

off the back of it: the election of such an overtly unsuitable candidate hardly serving as a rousing endorsement of female political participation.[145] Similarly, when Mutt (an equally ludicrous candidate) considers running for office in 1924, he is warned that his failure to pay his wife alimony will alienate female voters.[146] In *Doings of the Duffs,* Olivia's first trip to the ballot box is only explored in terms of her femininity and physical appearance: when you go to vote you have to provide your apparent weight and apparent height. Tom suggests Olivia she should put one ton for apparent weight.[147]

Indeed, while the overt treatment of the suffrage movement in the comics was fairly innocuous, especially from 1915, there was a marked increase in the number of jokes based on mocking female 'spinster' characters in the late 1910s, in particular those criticising unfeminine and larger women. These criticisms were usually made in the context of courtship and the fact that certain women were fundamentally undesirable to the opposite sex. Femininity and the physical and behavioural characteristics of the female sex were used as the basis for jokes across all the strips over most of the period. Cliff Sterrett had used the contrast between the stylish, beautiful and popular Polly Perkins and her unattractive and frumpy cousin Delicia for comic effect since the strip's inception. While Polly swanned elegantly about the house in the latest styles, Delicia stomped about in cumbersome boots. Delicia's attempts to wear the same fashionable articles as Polly failed spectacularly, her freckled face and inelegant demeanour preventing her from achieving the desired standards of femininity.[148] Similarly, George McManus' *Bringing Up*

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[145] 'The Gumps', *Great Falls Tribune,* 11 November 1922.
[146] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Miami Daily Arizona Silver Belt,* 14 March 1924.
[147] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* 15 September 1920.
[148] This comparison was made several times, but see in particular 'Polly and Her Pals', *Omaha Daily Bee*, 3 December 1913.

Father often contrasted Jiggs' wife Maggie with the many lovely young ladies that her husband

flirted with, with the set-up of Jiggs expecting a young lady to come into his office, but learning

in horror that it was Maggie instead, used often.[149]

From around 1917 to 1920, perhaps in response to growing female employment and impending

enfranchisement, there was a marked increase in jokes that insulted women based on their

appearance and physical size.[150] The continued presence of thin, pretty women (who looked

virtually indistinguishable from one another) served to further reinforce the failings of their

'undesirable' counterparts mocked fairly relentlessly on the comics page in this period. In *Polly*

and Her Pals, Delicia is joined by Aunt Maggie as a target of anti-female mirth, her large size

and unattractiveness the core subject of more than 20 strips in 1918.[151] A further seven were

dedicated to mocking Delicia's lack of femininity in the same period.[152] A similar proportion of

around ten percent of strips in 1919 carried on the theme (the sample is slightly smaller, but the

overall ratio of around ten percent remained consistent), falling slightly to eight percent in

1920.[153] Many of the jokes explicitly reference Maggie's inability to attract a husband, and

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[149] 'Bringing Up Father', *Topeka Daily State Journal,* 4 September 1922.

[150] The depiction of characters' participation in World War I is considered at length in Chapter 3 in the context of displays of patriotism, but it is interesting to note that the efforts of women to participate in the war effort were often undermined by their fundamental lack of capability. Delicia Perkins holds down a number of wartime jobs, but each one offers up a different opportunity for disaster. Her cousin Polly's desires to help are underscored by the limitations of her femininity, with her attraction to the uniform or desire to flirt with men usually pointed to as her key motivations. She, like Delicia, proves largely incompetent at actually carrying out the roles she is employed to do during World War One.

[151] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times* (20 February 1918, 23 March 1918, 16 May 1918, 20, 21, 28 May 1918, 11, 22. 29 June 1918, 24, 26, 29 July 1918, 22, 24 September 1918, 6 October 1918, 2, 7 November 1918, 21 December 1918).

[152] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times* (3, 21 February 1918, 24, 29 May 1918, 1 June 1918, 24 August 1918, 5 November 1918).

[153] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times* (6, 10, 21, 27 May 1919, 11, 14, 18, 20, 27 July 1919, 21 September 1919, 4, 8, 10, 17 October 1919, 1, 3 November 1919, 5 December 1919, 8, 9, 10, 31 January 1920, 21 February 1920, 14, 21, 26 May 1920, 2 September 1920, 8, 9 November 1920, 23 December 1920).

indeed in one strip from 1920 (a leap year) even the family's Chinese valet Neewah takes steps to prevent Maggie from proposing to him.[154] The jokes subside in frequency from this point, but the undesirability of Aunt Maggie is a constant background theme throughout the 1920s, from when she is so desperate for a kiss that she accosts a burglar in 1922, to her struggle finding a bathing suit large enough in 1926.[155]

Figure 28: 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 22 June 1918.

The same themes appeared in the other strips too. 'Fattie Hattie' appears in *The Gumps* in 1919, and Olivia Duff fulfils a similar role to Aunt Maggie in *Doings of the Duffs*, her failed attempts to 'reduce' and general unattractiveness providing punchlines throughout 1920.[156] A 1917 *Bringing Up Father* strip which saw Jiggs recoil in disgust at the sight of his wife in a swimsuit he had admired on a young girl at the beach earlier that day, was the first of many strips over the next year in which Jiggs judged and insulted women, both his wife and others, on the basis of

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[154] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times*, 8 January 1920.
[155] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 5 June 1922, *East Liverpool Review Tribune,* 30 November 1926.
[156] 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Evening Public,* 22 September 1919, 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star* (14 January 1920, 27 March 1920, 7 May 1920, 3 June 1920, 11 June 1920, 14 June 1920, 1 July 1920, 31 August 1920, 2 September 1920, 15 September 1920, 5 October 1920, 22 October 1920, 1 November 1920, 31 December 1920).

both physical appearance and age.[157] The audacity of unattractive or older women looking for mates was a common theme, with a 46 year-old neighbour of the Duff family scorned for being so bold as to flirt with Tom.[158] Despite the fact that the scene starts with Tom vainly admiring his own muscles in a reflection, he is not the target of the joke as he and Helen mock the woman for believing that he – or indeed anyone – would be interested in her romantically.

The increased freedom afforded to single middle-class women in the 1920s was not represented in the comics in this study either. Indeed, as late as 1935, the identity of women in the strips was always closely linked to their relationship with – and desirability to – their male counterparts. This is nowhere more evident than in the portrayal of theoretically 'modern' women in *Tillie the Toiler, Polly and Her Pals* and *The Bungle Family*. Tillie, the female lead in Russ Westover's strip, is the physical epitome of a flapper, with her fashionable bob and short skirts. Furthermore, Tillie is a young and single working woman; the strip (as suggested by the name) took place primarily at the office in which she was a stenographer and concerned the interactions between Tillie and her - mostly male - colleagues. Far from promoting the generation of independent young women making their way in the workplace, the entire premise of the strip is Tillie's utter lack of capability at work - she does not toil if she can help it. Indeed, the only time she has ever worked a full day was when her watch broke and she didn't realise it was 5:30.[159] In 1933, her hopelessness as a stenographer is further highlighted, when her colleague (and sometimes love interest) Mac builds a robotic stenographer, who is by far her superior at office tasks.[160] Beautiful

[157] 'Bringing Up Father', *Richmond Times Dispatch,* 9 July 1917.
[158] 'Doings of the Duffs', *West Virginian,* 22 October 1918.
[159] 'Tillie the Toiler', *Steubenville Herald Star,* 29 October 1921.
[160] 'Tillie the Toiler', various, September 1933.

and popular, Tillie is also shallow and extremely vain, using her role at Simpkins and Co to meet men and organise her social calendar. Even when, in 1928, she attempts to become the first female pilot to fly to Paris, the plot hinges not on her success, but on how attractive she looks in her new flying clothes.[161] Constantly juggling potential suitors, Tillie's identity is shaped by her appeal to the male characters in her world, and not her own independence or abilities.
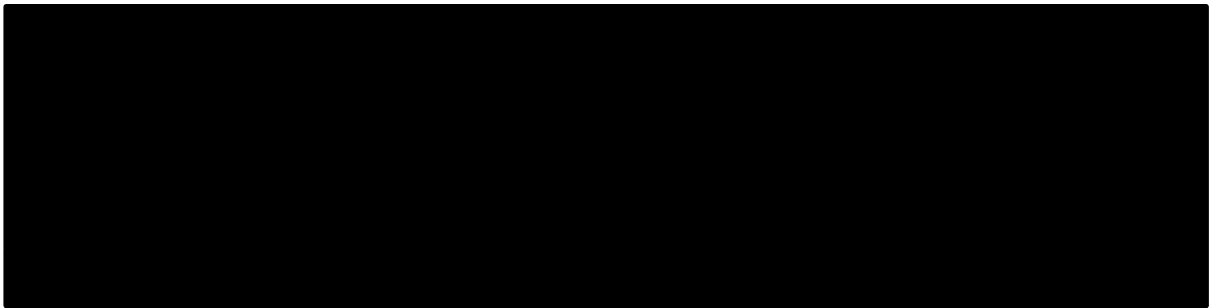
Figure 29: 'Tillie the Toiler', *Steubenville Herald-Star*, 16 January 1922.

Despite being the first female title character in any comic, Polly Perkins' role in *Polly and Her Pals* is extremely limited, and highlights the tendency towards casting females in relation to their male counterparts, instead of in their own right. As Ron Goulart noted in his enormous *Encyclopedia of American Comics:*

> The strip seemed to be about what was called at the time a new woman. Polly was a young miss of considerable self-possession who was attending college and otherwise making a place for herself in the world. But as Sterrett came to focus on Polly and her suitors and her father's reactions to them, the strip acquired a larger subject…. [and] it

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[161] 'Tillie the Toiler', *Dubuque Telegraph Herald*, 22 February 1928.

became increasingly apparent that the strip was actually about Polly's father, the irascible Sam Perkins, and the fools he had to suffer.[162]

While in the earlier strips Polly's 'modern' behavior – such as wearing skimpy swimwear at the beach – marked her out as a new woman, complaints from readers at his licentiousness led Sterrett to focus more on other storylines[163]. Polly faded into the background, her commitment to the fashions of the day serving as her defining feature (and the primary cause of her father's exasperation).
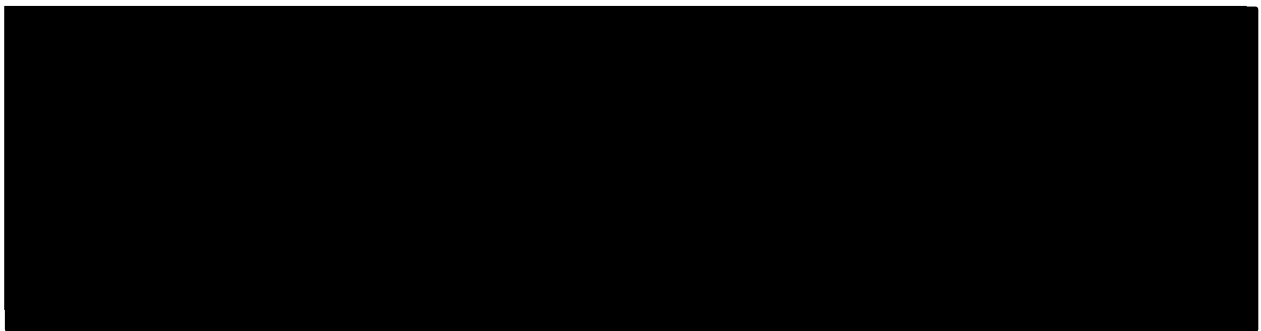
Figure 30: 'Polly and Her Pals', *El Paso Herald,* 18 April 1914

The character of Peggy Bungle, daughter to George and Jo, is used to explore the tensions between her mother's desires for her future and her own plans, illustrating the generational aspect of attitudes towards female advancement in the 1920s. From her introduction in 1929, Peggy's appearances are solely related to her lovelife, or lack thereof. Her modern attitude towards men and her lack of desire to marry are the cause of great concern to her mother, who

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[162] Goulart, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, pp. 295–5.
[163] Ibid., p. 295.

constantly bemoans her daughter's lack of interest in men, lamenting the fact that while all her friend's daughters are married, Peggy is still on the shelf. Peggy's brazen refusal to demur to male counterparts also raises alarm with Jo, who is shocked by her daughter's bold behaviour. In 1933, when the middle-aged millionaire that Jo has been trying to set Peggy up with for the last three years, insists she should end her fledgling movie career to be his wife, Peggy turns him down flat, aghast that he should even think of making such demands. While Peggy's character is far more independent than that of Polly Perkins or Tillie the Toiler, she too is defined solely by her relationships with male characters, in particular potential suitors, rather than as a character in her own right.[164]

The enduring impact of anti-suffrage discourse - and anti-feminist ideas more generally - is evident from the treatment of one of the strips' major supplementary characters, and her evolution over time. *The Gumps'* Widow Zander, who is first introduced in 1921, personifies a range of roles throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. In particular, her portrayal highlights the complex interaction of class and gender, with her 'shortcomings' as a single woman often explored in class terms. Zander first appears as a potential love interest for Billionaire Uncle Bim, much to the dismay of Andy and Min, who see her as a threat to their son's eventual claim on his fortune. She is a middle-class woman of moderate means. They first meet at a suitably cultural event – the opera – and both Min and Zander are wearing evening gowns and compliment each other lavishly. As soon as they part ways, the two women sneer at each other,

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[164] See for example 'The Bungle Family', *Sandusky Register,* (15 January 1929, 6 March 1929, 14 June 1929, 21 November 1931), *Syracuse Herald* (11 April 1932, 23 September 1932, 2 December 1932, 14 April 1933, 29 April 1933, 12 September 1933).

each criticising the other's lack of femininity.[165] As Bim and Zander continue their courtship, her intentions as a golddigger are made clear, and her initial role in the strip is as a stereotypical predatory, money-hungry society widow.[166] Furthermore, both Zander *and* Min define their relationship with Uncle Bim in terms of money. For three years, Smith toyed with his readers. Bim and Zander get as far as a wedding day before he leaves her at the altar and even after then he pines for her – and she pines for his money.[167]

When all hope of marriage to Bim seems lost, in 1925 Zander assumes a new role of a 'modern' working woman. After becoming involved with a shady businessman (Carlos) she loses what money she has, and goes broke. She is forced to pawn her belongings and get a job. She starts off in a fairly respectable position as a saleslady in a downtown boutique, dealing with rude upper-class customers who talk down to her and make her feel small.[168] Initially, however, her reaction is positive and she seems set to take on a persona of a strong working woman able to look after herself. When she gets her first pay check she marvels at the sense of freedom and independence that the money gives her, declaring 'It isn't the money – it's the feeling that I am strong enough to make my own way in the world – I know now how Columbus felt when he discovered a new world.'[169]

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[165] 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 18 January 1921.
[166] Zander's strategies are clearly revealed in 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star,* 16 January 1924 and *Lincoln Star,* 26 January 1925.
[167] 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star,* 7 January 1926.
[168] 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star* (16 September 1925, 30 September 1925, 1 October 1925).
[169] 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star*, 3 October 1925.
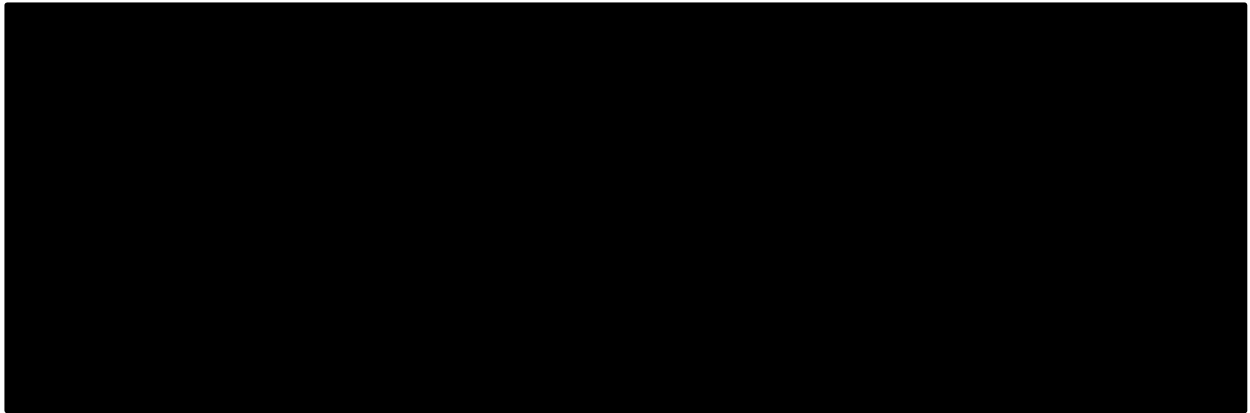
Figure 31: 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star*, 3 October 1925.

However, within a week, Zander falters, wishing that she was married and had a husband to look after her. Depicted without make-up or her wig, sitting in front of her looking glass as she applies a variety of creams she implores all married women to appreciate their husbands, saying:

> Oh these women who have husbands to support them – you wives in your comfortable little love nests – do you realize what a bed of roses you're lying in? If you had to get up in the middle of the night like I do and stand on your feet all day – any kind of husband – as long as he has two arms and two legs and is able to bring home his salary every week – thank heaven you've got him – I'd like to shout to every wife in the world – "stick to him even if he fights you", because it's easier for a woman to fight one man than the world.[170]

This point is made explicitly in a separate storyline two years later as Zander tells all wives to feel grateful they have someone to look after them financially.[171] As time goes on, Zander's

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[170] 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star,* 12 October 1925.
[171] 'The Gumps', East Liverpool Review Tribune, 23 March 1927.

fortunes fall further: she loses her nice job at the boutique and has to take one waitressing in a grubby diner.[172] She then loses that job, collapses and develops amnesia.[173] Her only way out of the destitution is via Bim, who comes to her rescue once again.[174]

Into 1929, Zander sets her sights on another rich man, Tom Carr, and once again drives herself into debt attempting to impress him with expensive clothes and jewellery.[175] For a couple of years she plays the two men off against each other, dreaming of a wealthy future with one of them. In one 1931 strip (figure 32 below), Smith makes clear the contrast between her private persona and her public image. This comparison draws on imagery that was commonly used in anti-suffragette posters from over a decade earlier. Zander is seen in a state of semi-undress, smoking a cigarette and surrounded by make-up, tanning lotions and creams. She gazes at herself in the mirror, congratulating herself on her plans to rid herself of poverty and ensnare the (much younger) Tom Carr. In the third panel, fully transformed, she is the proper middle-class lady once again. Wig neat, make up applied and fur coat donned she greets Tom Carr and assures him of her devotion to him.

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[172] 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star,* 17 November 1925.
[173] 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star,* 4 December 1925.
[174] 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star,* 5 December 1925.
[175] 'The Gumps', *Marion Star,* 4 June 1929.

Figure 32: 'The Gumps', *East Liverpool Review,* 20 May 1931.

This construct is repeated a few years later with a new down-and-out love interest and her avaricious mother-in-law, who eat tinned food in a grubby motel while assuming the role of society women in order to try and ensnare Bim and his fortune.[176] In both instances, Smith engages with several intersecting themes relating to class, gender and social status. Most basically of course, Zander is repeatedly depicted as unable to cope without a man. Despite her comfortable financial status in the early strips, she is not intelligent enough to exist in a man's world, and when she tries (the business deal with the crook Carlos) she finds herself outsmarted and loses everything.[177] At a deeper level, she also represents many of the fears surrounding 'unfeminine' women that characterised the wave of antifeminism that swept the States and Britain in the interwar years.[178] Perhaps the greatest concern is her use of trickery – using consumer products like wigs, beauty products and clothing – to conceal her true self (which is a

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[176] 'The Gumps', *East Liverpool Review Tribune,* 14 November 1932.
[177] 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star,* 22 August 1925.
[178] Two excellent studies of this subject are Lucy Bland, *Modern women on trial* and Gillian Swanson, *Antifeminism in America: A Historical Reader* (New York, 2013).

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combination of poverty and unwomanly sexuality) and take on a respectable and ladylike middle-class persona.

The men and women of the comic world exist within gender boundaries inherited from nineteenth-century separate spheres ideology, based around a female domestic setting and traditional family structure. The middle-class household provides a setting for the satirical subversion of those boundaries, which ultimately reinforces social hierarchies based on gender. Women that exist outside a middle-class family structure like Tillie the Toiler or Henrietta Zander are portrayed as either mildly dangerous or ultimately weak, the objects of ridicule rather than admiration. With the exception of Walt Wallet, none of the male characters in the strips have any success at fulfilling the model of domestic masculinity as laid out by Margaret Mash. In sum, it seems likely that comic artists sought to appeal to an audience that still held conservative viewpoints about the place of men and women in society, regardless – or perhaps as a result – of the social changes that had blurred the boundaries between the public sphere and the middle class home.

Middle-class 'culture', consumerism and social mobility

Figure 33: Andy considers the importance of baggage. 'The Gumps', *New Castle News,* 18 May 1928.

The strips in this study portrayed characters living in situations that ranged across the social

spectrum, from the upper-class, society lifestyle of Jiggs and Maggie (*Bringing Up Father),* via

the upper-middle class suburbs of *The Gumps, Polly and Her Pals, Gasoline Alley* and *Doings of*

the Duffs, through to the lower-middle class of *Bungle Family, Abie the Agent* and *Tillie the*

Toiler and the penniless (and arguably classless) *Happy Hooligan* and *Mutt and Jeff.* While it has

been possible to categorise the strips in this way based on common class signifiers, the strips are

united by a common approach to spending. To some degree, all of these strips perpetuated and

encouraged the habit of spending on luxury items above necessities, with social status clearly

linked to the acquisition of consumer goods. While the desire of most Americans to project an

appearance of affluence was not new to the twentieth century (Alexis deToqueville had observed

similar behaviour as early as 1831) the explosion in advertising in this period had made the

acquisition of material goods more attractive than ever before. Comic culture, without doubt,

reinforced the link between social status and consumer choices, normalising the idea of spending

beyond one's means and contributing to the pressure on all Americans to consume, regardless of

their financial status.[179] However, all of the strips also parodied the habit of conspicuous consumption, poking fun at characters' attempts to appear more affluent than they were, and creating satirical humour by tripping up characters that tried to mix with people they identified as being above their own social standing. In this regard, the strips expose considerable tension in the idea of the 'social inclusiveness of consumption' and demonstrate a deep ambivalence towards the myth of the American Dream.

The citizen consumer: middle-class culture as the 'American Way'

The shift from a producer-oriented to consumer-oriented society has long been used by historians as part of the overarching narrative of American history. While some studies have situated the beginning of this process as early as the American Revolution, a general consensus exists that in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Americans began placing a premium on the act of consumption and the ability to purchase particular consumer goods, some time before the same goods and experiences became widely available.[180] The values shift associated with the growth of consumerism has been widely documented. Warren Susman's study of self-help manuals concluded that between the 1890s and 1920s, Americans moved from a culture of character to one of personality, a theory that has been extremely influential.[181] The new middle class of

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[179] In 'Gender, Generation and Consumption in the United States: Working Class Families in the Interwar Period', a book chapter in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century, edited* by C. McGovern, S. Strasser and M. Judt, Susan Porter Benson argues that pressures to consume assaulted all Americans more relentlessly beginning in the 1920s - the comics suggest that in fact this process happened even earlier.

[180] T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (Oxford, 2005); Lawrence B. Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago, 2009).

[181] Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984).

bureaucrats and white-collar workers embraced this new culture of abundance and consumerism, leading to the broad acceptance of the idea that mass consumption and leisure was a fundamental component of the 'American Way', a term which, by the 1930s, had come to be associated with a lifestyle that was accessible to the vast majority of Americans.[182]

The American standard of living, and the explosion of consumerism in the early twentieth century, introduces a tension to the narrative of class divisions established in the workplace, with different values and behaviours associated with each group. The significant decline in the cost of food meant that by 1910, American workers fed themselves on 37-47% of their earnings, compared to the 61-66% allocated in the budgets of their British counterparts.[183] The leftover discretionary income could be spent on luxury, non-essential items that were previously associated with a 'middle-class' lifestyle (for instance automobiles, pianos and white goods), with the introduction of instalment purchasing making such items more readily available on a 'buy now, pay later' basis.[184] Theoretically, then, blue-collar laborers could, through their consumption choices, be 'working class at work, middle class at home'.[185]

In this regard, the relationship between consumer culture and class formation is complicated and somewhat cyclical. On the one hand, historians have argued that the wide availability of mass-marketed consumer goods at lower prices blurred class boundaries, with Americans as a whole

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[182] Wall, *Inventing the 'American Way'*.
[183] Andrew R. Heinze, Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity (New York, 1990), p. 23.
[184] Ibid., p. 23.
[185] Anderson, 'The Language of Class in Twentieth-Century America', p. 262.

homogenised as a 'People of Plenty'.[186] Further, countless studies have equated consumption

with citizenship, arguing that newly arrived immigrants, seeing consumer behaviour as a central

tenet of belonging in American society, purchased commodities as a means of expressing their

desire to Americanise.[187] This idea, popular among academics in the 1980s and 1990s, suggested

that consumption had become a 'democratic exercise in which anybody could be anything

merely by donning the right outfit or car or style.'[188] Problematically, however, references to a

(usually undefined) 'middle-class' consumer lifestyle abound in even the most nuanced studies,

suggesting that certain types of spending were still understood to be indicators of class-

belonging.[189] Indeed, studies carried out by Progressive reformers suggested that while middle-

class households were experiencing new comforts and a new sense of choice, working-class

households made their discretionary expenditures in ways that reflected old patterns more than

they foretold new ones.[190] Work by Lawrence Glickman and Lizabeth Cohen, among others, has

examined the impact of mass culture on working class and ethnic communities, concluding that

consumerism did little to undermine working-class culture in the early twentieth century.[191] It is

evident that the relationship between social identity and consumer behaviour was complicated,

and not a simple narrative of a mass consumer culture eradicating class boundaries and

redefining social hierarchies.

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[186] Potter, *People of Plenty*.

[187] See for example Lizabeth Cohen, 'The New Deal State and the Making of Citizen Consumers', in Charles McGovern, Matthias Judt, and Susan Strasser, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 111–125; Heinze, *Adapting to abundance* (New York, 1990).

[188] Juliet Schor and Douglas B. Holt, eds., *The Consumer Society Reader* (New York, NY, 2000).

[189] Anderson, 'The Language of Class in Twentieth-Century America'.

[190] Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Chicago, 1992), p. 50.

[191] Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, N.Y, 1997); Cohen, 'Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots'; Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (Cambridge; New York, 1994).

Consumerism and class in the comics

The comics engaged with the idea of a consumer society, and consumerism as a means of securing social position, in several ways. The table below summarises the depiction of spending activity across the strips, focusing on areas usually associated with a middle-class lifestyle. There are several patterns. All but two strips feature home-ownership, with the process of moving out of a rented building and buying a property documented in *Abie the Agent, The Gumps,* and *Doings of the Duffs.*[192] The majority of the households have at least one domestic servant (The Bungles do not, and Jo Bungle is regularly seen cooking and cleaning), own a car and have some luxury household items in their possession. Further, on a number of occasions, ownership of pianos, antiques and household appliances is explicitly linked to social status. Gender and class intersect around the issue of consumerism. In the vast majority of the strips, the female characters are regularly depicted shopping, often sweet-talking their reluctant husbands into allowing the purchase of a new hat or this season's dresses. Characters go on annual holidays, attend dances and throw parties. Certainly, a cursory analysis of the strips in this study support Ian Gordon's contention that in the 1920s, comic strip artists created a vision of America as a predominantly white, middle-class, society ordered through an ethos of consumption.[193]

Strip	Home ownership	Automobile ownership	Domestic help	Luxury home goods	Latest fashions	Experiential spending
Happy Hooligan	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Travel & dining out frequent
Mutt & Jeff	Rent small apartments	Jeff owns a flivver	Occasionally	Occasionally	Occasionally	Travel & dining out frequent,

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[192] 'Abie the Agent', *Portsmouth Daily Times,* 19th November 1927, 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 19th April 1921, 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* 20th December 1922.
[193] Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945*, p. 107.

						club members
Abie the Agent	Rents until late 1920s; also owns a beach house	Yes	Chauffeur and maid	Piano, books, some artwork	No – will scrimp on suits	Club member, restaurants, vacations
Bringing Up Father	Yes, owns large home then builds another	Yes and chauffeur	Yes – large staff	Yes – piano, expensive furniture, art, antiques etc	Yes, Maggie always in latest styles	Restaurants, vacations, music lessons , club member
Polly & Pals	Yes (implied through mortgage joke)	Yes – cook and manservant	Yes – valet and cook	Yes – piano, antiques etc	Yes, the women are always in latest styles	Annual vacations
The Gumps	Yes – buy in 1921	Yes - maid	Yes – maid	Yes – piano, home furnishings	Min will buy clothes over food	Annual vacations
Bungle Family	No – rented apartments	Only after becoming (temporarily) rich	No	Only after becoming (temporarily) rich	Minimal	Vacations
Doings of the Duffs	Yes – buy in 1922	Yes	Yes – cook and manservant	Yes – piano, vacuum cleaner	Yes, lots of shopping	Vacations
Gasoline Alley	Implied (no reference to landlords)	Yes	Yes – live in maid	Yes – piano	Not excessive	Vacations
Tillie the Toiler	Unknown – lives with mother	Yes (shares with a friend)	None pictured	Saving for a piano	Borrows money to buy clothes	Vacations, dances, restaurants

The comics perpetuated the idea that all Americans could - and therefore should - afford certain luxuries, regardless of income. Lack of funds was rarely depicted as a barrier to consumer behaviour, with the characters across all the strips prioritising luxury purchases even at times when money was tight. While no storylines engaged with the 'buy now, pay later' trend that emerged in this period, borrowing money from friends, family members and co-workers was a

common practice. During hard times (and particularly in the war years) efforts to economise saw clothes being mended instead of replaced, children's hair being cut by their fathers, domestic servants being let go and unappetising but cheap foodstuffs being bought in bulk to save on costs.[194] Yet such periods were usually short-lived, with the seemingly contradictory themes of money worries and excessive spending structuring the consumer behaviour in the strips. Even for the penniless Mutt and Jeff, an inability to pay their rent did not stop them from enjoying urban refinements, such as eating in restaurants, staying in hotels and taking taxis.[195] The miserly nature of secondary characters was clearly delineated as negative and inappropriate: the excessive stinginess of *Gasoline Alley*'s Avery and *Abie the Agent's* Minsk used to contrast the willingness of the principal characters to consume.
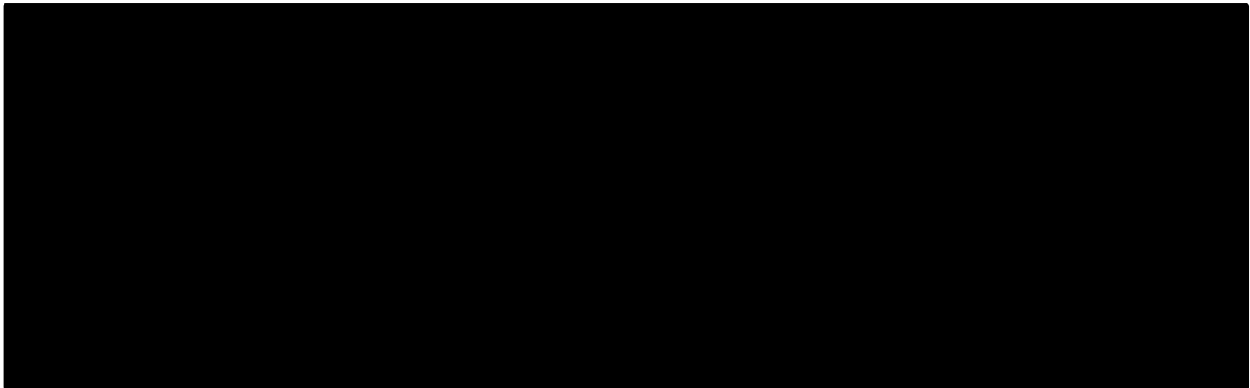
Figure 34: Gasoline Alley, *Hamilton Evening Journal,* 23 March 1928.

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[194] Andy cuts all of Chester's hair off in 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 17 June 1920 and tries to prepare meals from cheap ingredients in 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 18 July 1918. Polly attempts to darn some clothes in 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 8 February 1919.
[195] See for example 'Mutt and Jeff', *Boston Globe,* 13 July 1920, *Portsmouth Daily Times,* 19 October 1925, *Frederick Daily News*, 26 April 1935.

Ian Gordon, in his analysis of *Gasoline Alley* and *Winkle,* points out the reciprocal relationship between advertising and the comics. As Gordon explains, by the mid-1930s, comic art was often used as an advertising format, with comic characters regularly appearing in adverts for consumer goods (see figure 35 below). At the same time, the strips themselves displayed a vision of American life shaped by the same commodities: the strips not only represented consumerism, they also played an active part in selling it. For decades, companies had paid top dollar to advertise on or around the comics page. By 1933, advertising space in *Comic Weekly* was selling for $16,000 to $17,500 a page, compared to average rates of $11,500 to $12,500 for national circulation in *Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies' Home Journal.*[196] Roland Marchand's comprehensive analysis of American advertising from 1920 to 1940 found a similar picture of American society to that of the comics: one where a 'good life' culture represented an aspirational, rather than realistic, lifestyle that would have been accessible to a far smaller cross-section of American society than the ads implied.[197] It would be easy enough to explain the strips' depiction of consumer society as a deliberate attempt to encourage consumers to spend to their limits in order to be able to afford the commodities being marketed to them via the comics and the adverts accompanying them.

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[196] Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, p. 112.
[197] Ibid., p. 51.

Figure 35: A standard Mutt and Jeff Panel is accompanied by a single panel advertisement for a shoe store. *Topeka Daily State Journal*, 14 February 1916.

However, this explanation ignores the element of social satire present in all the strips' treatment of consumer behaviour. With the exception of *Bringing Up Father* (which addresses the issue of social climbing from a slightly different perspective) budgeting, and even occasionally penny-pinching, is combined with conspicuous consumption - consumer behaviour motivated not by personal need or want, but by the desire to maintain status - to create a constant state of tension and insecurity. This anxiety is nowhere more evident than in *Abie the Agent*, whose protagonist Abe Kabibble is the epitome of the conspicuous consumer. Abe spends two decades alternatively agonising about making ends meet and making lavish purchases for the purposes of appearing more successful than he actually is. His desire to keep up appearances is such that in a December 1917 strip, he laments the fact that he cannot afford his favourite tongue sandwiches from this local delicatessen but, in the next frame, buys a homeless man five of them, rather than losing face in front of the shop's owner.[198] He (along with many of his acquaintances) pretends to go on vacations he cannot afford in 1921, 1928 and 1931; wonders whether his salary sounds more

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[198] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 8 December 1917.

impressive expressed in weekly or annual terms; and even pretends to have cash on him when he

is held up by muggers, rather than let them know that he is broke.[199]

Taken alone, Abe's obsession with money could be attributed to his Jewishness, an exaggeration

of the stereotypes prevalent in American popular culture in this period.[200] Certainly, of all the

strips in the study, *Abie the Agent* is the most preoccupied with the subject of money. However,

Abe is not the only one with an intense desire to 'keep up with the Joneses', suggesting that this

behaviour was not the exclusive preserve of a specific ethnic group and was instead a social

phenomenon explored by several of the period's comic artists. Jo and George Bungle are

obsessed with what their neighbours think of them, Pa Perkins hides a pack of sandwiches under

his hat in order to conceal the fact that he cannot afford to buy lunch, and pays into Christmas

collections he cannot afford in order to keep up appearances.[201] Tom Duff is caught by a friend

eating in a cheap cafe, and both men pretend that they have never been there, despite being

regulars.[202] Doris (Wilbur Duff's new bride) buys a $60 hat she cannot afford, knowing she will

have to return it, in order to make a female friend think that she and Wilbur are doing better than

[199] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 13 September 1921, *Portsmouth Daily Times,* 12 September 1928, *Albuquerque Journal,* 9 May 1931, *Portsmouth Daily Times* (11 March 1926, 16 April 1929).
[200] The Jewish miser stereotype had long been prevalent in American – and European – culture. Historians such as Oscar Handlin, Rudolph Glanz, John Appel, John Higham and Michael Dobowski have explored the cultural development of the caricatured American Jew, noting his role as a symbolic representative for urban finance capitalism. Appel argues that in the early nineteenth century, Americans still had a well-established stereotype of the Jew as 'conniving, swindling, rich, wicked and yet comic Jews in the Elizabethan Shylock tradition'. The hard edges of this caricature were softened going into the twentieth century, something for which Harry Hershfield (creator of *Abie the Agent*) claimed a degree of credit. However, the association with Jews and (even amusing) money-grubbing, miserly behaviour would endure.
[201] See 'The Bungle Family', *Sandusky Register,* 9 May 1929, 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 29 October 1920, *Omaha Daily Bee*, 25 December 1913.
[202] 'Doings of the Duffs'*, Seattle Star,* 22 January 1919.

they are.[203] In several *Gumps* storylines, ladies hoping to impress Uncle Bim go to any lengths in order to appear wealthier than they are, including getting into debt with dangerous loan sharks.

In *Mutt and Jeff*, comic artist Bud Fisher explored the concept of status anxiety in a different way, using the comedy of one-upmanship to satirise the behaviour of making decisions solely in order to gain the approval of other people. The regularly utilised construct (as demonstrated in figure 36 below) goes as follows: one of the characters (usually Mutt) does something in order to impress the other (usually Jeff). This could be getting a new job, buying something he deems impressive or demonstrating physical prowess. Eagerly, he positions himself so that his counterpart can see him, only to find his rival already in possession of, or demonstrating, a far superior position, product or activity, blissfully unaware of any intended competition. In these examples, the laughter is clearly being directed at the failed attempt to get one over on his friend; the humour is derived from the frustration and embarrassment felt by the person who had sought to demonstrate his superiority, and amusement at the fact he has ended up in an inferior position.

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[203] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star*, 11 April 1922.
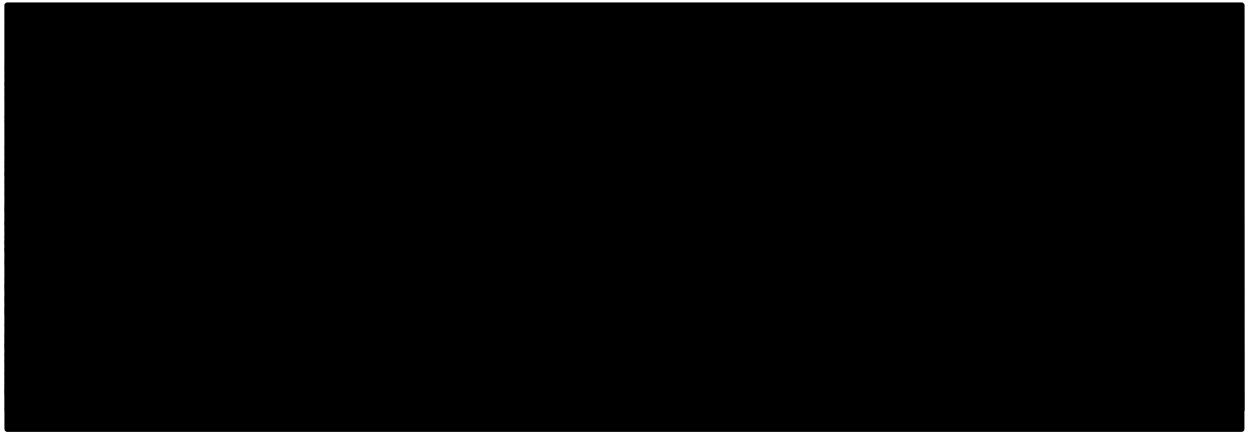
Figure 36: 'Mutt and Jeff', *Boston Globe,* 26 December 1919.

On occasion the characters in the strips comment on this habit of conspicuous consumption. When Andy Gump finds a receipt for one of Min's new dresses, he laments the widespread decline in frugality and economy, noting that where his mother and her generation had sewing bees and would 'brag at how inexpensive they could make a dress', his wife and her friends compete over who has spent the most, and done the least themselves.[204] Pa Perkins made the same complaint a few years later, saying that when he was a boy, Christmas stockings were full of nothing but 'apples an' nuts or mebbe a hankie or two', whereas today it's an 'annual shirt-hockin bee, t-keep up appearances'.[205]

The strips did not fulfil a straightforward role in the development of consumer culture in the early twentieth century. On the one hand, as Ian Gordon has shown, they did present consumerism (regardless of income) as a social norm that was accessible and expected,

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[204] 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 13 August 1921.
[205] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Steubenville Herald Star*, 21 December 1925.

signalling an acceptance of a mainstream lifestyle that was decidedly middle-class and defined by spending. However, at the same time comic artists satirised the very idea of conspicuous consumption, both in their mocking of characters attempting to spend their way into social success and the musings of the older generation. The strips therefore reveal a level of ambivalence about the connection of social status and material culture.

In this regard, the strips had much in common with early twentieth-century literary culture, and their focus on consumer behaviour and its place in American society was in keeping with wider social interest in the phenomenon. After Thostein Veblen coined the phrase 'conspicuous consumption' in his 1899 book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, the topic became a favourite subject for novelists.[206] Of particular note is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, first published in 1925. The novel took the topic of the leisure class and the idea of a society structured by consumerism and treated it with 'all the analytical intelligence that a Victorian novelist would have brought to topics such as religious nonconformity or the rising middle classes'.[207] While the comic supplements of the same period could hardly claim to have demonstrated quite the same level of intellectual care, through often biting social satire they too brought the new habit of conspicuous consumption into sharp relief. Doubtless, the strips certainly went some way to uphold – and even promote – the consumer behaviours that were encouraged by advertisers. But they also exposed the fragility of a social system that relied on spending instead of producing as a means of designating status, suggesting that quality could not be bought and relied on more than the acquisition of luxury stockings or the latest automobile.

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[206] Catherine Morley, *Modern American Literature* (Edinburgh, 2012), p. 291.
[207] Guy Reynolds, introduction to Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London, 1993), p. xii.

Social mobility and the limitations of the American Dream

The term 'American Dream'' became part of the American vocabulary in around 1931. Defined by Jennifer Hochschild as the 'promise held out to every American that he or she has a reasonable chance of achieving success through his or her own efforts,' the term suggests that American society is fundamentally fluid, with an open class system, and social transformation entirely possible, and determined by individual effort.[208] Social barriers to upwards mobility are theoretically minimal, with movement up and down the ladder tied closely to financial success and consumer activity. The myth goes that unlike European countries, whose class systems had been entrenched for generations, America's unique focus on individualism, democracy and equality of opportunity allowed for a society free of class constraints and structured by meritocracy. The American Dream as an ideology has been extremely powerful in American history, with the explosion in consumer culture of the first few decades of the twentieth century seeming only to validate the myth of a classless and prosperous American nation. From their inception however, the comics challenged the idea of the American Dream, even before it took linguistic form. In many ways, the strips suggested subtly that an individual's position in society was determined by inherent personal qualities, which lay in more than just financial achievement or consumer behaviour.

Strikingly, a comparison of the social positions of the main characters at the point the strip started and when this study ends in 1935 demonstrates a high degree of continuity. In eight out of ten of the strips (*The Gumps, Bringing Up Father, The Bungle Family, Doings of the Duffs, Polly*

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[208] Rottenberg, 'Salome of the Tenements', p. 65.

and Her Pals, The Bungles, Tillie the Toiler, Mutt and Jeff and *Happy Hooligan*), their overall

position on the social ladder stays the same, despite regular and dramatic social catastrophes,

enormous financial windfalls and huge stock market losses. *Abie the Agent* has changed position

insofar as by the end of the strip he is a married father and seems to have settled in an office job;

similarly, Walt Wallet of *Gasoline Alley,* who began the strip a confirmed bachelor who tinkered

with cars, finishes it as a middle manager with a wife and two children (and a possible multi-

million dollar inheritance in the works). Neither Abe nor Walt moves from their original

residential setting however. Abe changes apartment building several times, but remains in the

city and not the suburbs. Similarly, Walt's new wife and white-collar job does not impact on his

lifestyle of choice of neighbourhood. Movement up and down the social ladder on the comic

page was characteristically sudden and dramatic, and usually caused by the acquisition or loss of

large lump sums through inheritance, handouts or stock market success rather than persistent

hard work. In *The Bungle Family,* George and Jo's abrupt upward mobility springs from the sale

of a guinea pig farm – that just so happened to be on an oil site – for a million dollars in April

1929.[209] They are restored to their old position after - just a month before the Wall Street Crash -

George loses all his money on the stock market.[210] In fact the Wall Street Crash and the

depression had very minimal impact on the world of the comics pages, with only a handful of

references to it between 1929 and 1935: Abe considers the causes of depression in two strips, and

later ends up in a breadline, George Bungle and Walt Wallet separately ponder exactly what it

means to be in a depression and Mutt and Jeff both – somewhat controversially – attempt suicide

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[209] 'The Bungle Family', *Sandusky Register,* 25 April 1929.
[210] 'The Bungle Family', *Sandusky Register,* 1 October 1929.

after losing all their money in the crash, then later wonder if the depression is over.[211] For the most part, the characters continued on as before, with the majority of strips moving away from stories focused on obsessive husbands checking the stock market every day to other storylines.

Moreover, acquisition of wealth did not bring with it automatic membership in the higher classes; in this way the strips mirrored the description of a social elite noted by Noel Kent as 'brutally competitive'.[212] After George and Jo's 1929 windfall, they move to a new neighbourhood full of society people, purchase antiques and hire a butler, but their behaviour singles them out as "new money", and they are looked down on by their society neighbours.[213] Similarly, the entire premise of George McManus' *Bringing Up Father* was the struggle faced by Maggie and Jiggs to 'pass' as upper class: despite their money, as we are reminded time and again, they were working class to the core, with Maggie's attempts to improve Jiggs never failing to conceal his true identity as an Irish hod carrier, who just wanted to be one of the boys. Attempts by characters to mix with members of society that they perceived as being above them on the social ladder never went well, with social pretensions treated as a cause for ridicule. In a 1920 *Gumps* strip entitled 'Class Will Tell', Andy and Min prepare for an evening out, courtesy of Uncle Bim, who has sent them tickets to the Grand Opera and loaned them his chauffeured car. Eagerly anticipating the reaction of their neighbours, they prance out to the car, where Andy ruins the whole thing, by shaking hands with the footman and offering him a cigar.[214] When Ma

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[211] 'Abie the Agent', *Madison Capital Times,* 11 October 1930, *Albuquerque Journal* (21, 22 January 1931, 6 May 1931), 'The Bungle Family', *Syracuse Herald,* 31 December 1932, 'Gasoline Alley', *Bakersfield Californian,* 17 October 1931, 'Mutt and Jeff', *Sandusky Register,* 10 December 1929, *Logansport Pharos Tribune,* 24 June 1931, 28 October 1931.
[212] Noel J. Kent, *America in 1900* (Oxford, 2000), p. 53.
[213] 'The Bungle Family', *Sandusky Register*, 18 May 1929, 17 July 1929,
[214] 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 28 December 1920.

and Pa Perkins (of *Polly and Her Pals*) attend a society function, they are blissfully unaware of the disapproval of the aristocratic lady who complains at the 'preponderance of vulgarians here tonight', with Pa chuckling at the fact that the woman thinks he and Ma are 'furriners' (foreigners).[215] Similarly, Tom Duff's attempt to impress the folks at the yacht club goes equally as badly wrong when he cannot remember the correct terminology for the parts of the boat, and thus has to leave a conversation with the commodore flushed with embarrassment.[216]

Figure 37: 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Evening Ledger,* 28 December 1920.

Ultimately, as each of these examples (among dozens more) served to demonstrate, upwards social mobility was far more complicated than simply changing neighbourhoods or moving in different social circles. In an era in which the boundaries of social (and racial) hierarchies were in flux, membership in even the upper-middle class required more than just cash. Despite the fact that the very wealthy were mocked just as heavily by comic artists as were avaricious social climbers, the distinction between the 'quality' of old money and the 'vulgarity' of the nouveau

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[215] 'Polly and Her Pals', *East Liverpool Review Tribune,* 30 April 1931.
[216] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* 26 June 1922.

riche was ever-present, undermining the core tenets of the American Dream and the possibility it offered for limitless social advancement.

Social class and cultural capital

Figure 38: 'The Bungle Family', *Sandusky Register*, 3 April 1930.

In popular discourse, cultural habits and tastes serve as a convenient surrogate for social class, with the idea that certain cultural activities, preferences and behaviours are indicative of social status. As Irene Thomson argues, references to the 'liberal elite', the 'establishment', or the 'new class' all invoke images not of money and achievement – which were beyond reproach in the American mainstream of the early twentieth century – but of intellectual snobbery and rarefied tastes.[217] Many historians have relegated the comics to the status of unimportant lowbrow culture, fodder for the uncritical masses and unworthy of serious academic study.[218] Perhaps due to the association of modern comic books with children and adolescents, argues Thierry Gronensteen, comic art suffers from an 'extraordinarily narrow image', often viewed as the

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[217] Irene Taviss Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas* (Ann Arbor, Mi, 2010), p. 187.
[218] Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen, eds., *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics* (Copenhagen, Denmark, 2000), p. 17.

cultural equivalent of a Happy Meal - something to be enjoyed quickly, requiring minimal digestion and containing very little of cultural value.[219] The notion of cultural hierarchy is extremely pervasive, with the stratification and division of cultural pursuits into 'high' and 'low' culture usually aligned to corresponding hierarchies of social class. Lawrence Levine used Shakespeare's plays to illustrate how in the early nineteenth century 'Americans were part of a shared public culture which was less hierarchically organised and fragmented into relatively rigid adjectival boxes than their descendants a century later'.[220] By the late 1800s, there was a clear distinction between the 'higher pleasures' of the socially superior and the low culture of 'the masses' focused on spectacle and noise. Elizabeth Traube argues that even the commercial popular culture of the later nineteenth century was split into 'sensational' and 'genteel' forms, a distinction which both reflected and promoted a growing separation of social classes. 'Genteel' forms of culture included magazines, sentimental fiction and the respectable theater, whereas the 'sensational' forms aimed at the industrial working classes included dime novels, the penny press, blackface and minstrelsy. As Traube acknowledges, the birth of mass culture (of which the syndicated comic was clearly a significant part) in the early twentieth century began to erode the correlation between high and popular culture, with mass commercial popular culture like comics, radio shows and movies consumed at comparable rates across the social spectrum.[221]

The comics engaged with the notion of a hierarchy of popular culture, and the associated concepts of intellectualism and cultural capital, in a number of ways, which varied over the

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[219] Thierry Gronensteen, 'Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimisation', in Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen, eds., *Comics as Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics* p. 29.
[220] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow, lowbrow: the emergence of cultural hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), p. 9.
[221] Elizabeth G. Traube, 'The Popular in American Culture', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 25 p. 143.

course of this study. The superiority theory of humour is most applicable in terms of understanding how the audience is expected to react. Broadly, though, the following statements can be said to be true: 1) Cultural awareness is clearly associated with class status, with characters displaying anxiety over demonstrating their cultural and intellectual capital to their peers and social betters; 2) The main characters in the strip are usually shown to lack cultural capital, with their intellectual and cultural faux pas regularly used as the central joke; 3) In order to understand the punchline of these jokes, the readers of the comics themselves would have had to have a fairly high level of literacy, good comprehension of grammar and wide-ranging cultural awareness. The incongruity from which a joke derived is only apparent if you understand what the character has got wrong. 4) The tastes and actions of the self-congratulatory cultural and intellectual elite were regularly and overtly mocked by the strips' culturally less literate protagonists.

Cultural awareness is used to denote class status throughout all the strips over the entire time period and the distinction between high and low brow pursuits clearly understood. Walt Wallet cannot persuade any of his *Alley* buddies to accompany him to a recital as they all prefer 'lowbrow' activities.[222] George and Jo Bungle discuss the cultural standing of their neighbours using the same vocabulary.[223] George McManus' *Bringing Up Father* contrasts the 'low' working class tastes of Jiggs and his manual labourer buddies with the 'high' preferences of the social elite that his wife Maggie is trying to emulate for comic effect. Maggie is perpetually humiliated by Jiggs' penchant for Corned Beef and Cabbage, a dish she associates with their

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[222] 'Gasoline Alley', *Washington Post*, 17 May 1923.
[223] 'The Bungle Family', *Frederick News Post,* 6 July 1931.

working-class background, and his lack of appreciation for the fashionable fayre that various society cooks and chefs prepare for them. His unwillingness to go to the opera or theater, read the classics or associate with her society friends is a constant frustration. The joke, however, is often at Maggie's expense. In one exchange, Jiggs asks if he may go to the movies tonight, and is told by a cross Maggie not to be so 'vulgar', as 'intellectual people do not go to such things'. Instead, she says, they are to go and visit a professor that evening so that they may learn something by listening to him. Upon arriving at the professor's house they are told by a servant that he is out... at the movies.[224] This example serves to illustrate the complex way in which the strips could alternate between reinforcing and subverting social norms, ultimately acknowledging and exploring the division of society into different hierarchies in a multitude of ways.

Jokes highlighting the cultural shortcomings of the main characters came in many guises, all of which required the reader of the strip to have the cultural capital lacked by the victim of the sketch in order to understand the joke, and, presumably, feel superior. While these jokes appeared in every strip at one time or another, they were markedly more common in *Bringing Up Father, Abie the Agent, Mutt and Jeff* and *Polly and Her Pals*. A classic set up is illustrated in figure 39 below. Daughter tells Maggie and Jiggs that she has bought a replica Venus de Milo, and Maggie chastises Jiggs' ignorance when he asks if it is a self-starter (a type of car). The statue arrives when Daughter is out, and Jiggs insists on the courier returning it. When he tells Maggie that both the statue's arms were broken off, she exclaims at the carelessness of the

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[224] 'Bringing Up Father', *Corpus Christi Caller*, 22 July 1922.

couriers, exposing her own ignorance.[225] The broken Venus de Milo setup is used again by

McManus on at least five other occasions, and is also borrowed by Harry Herschfield in *Abie the*

Agent.[226]
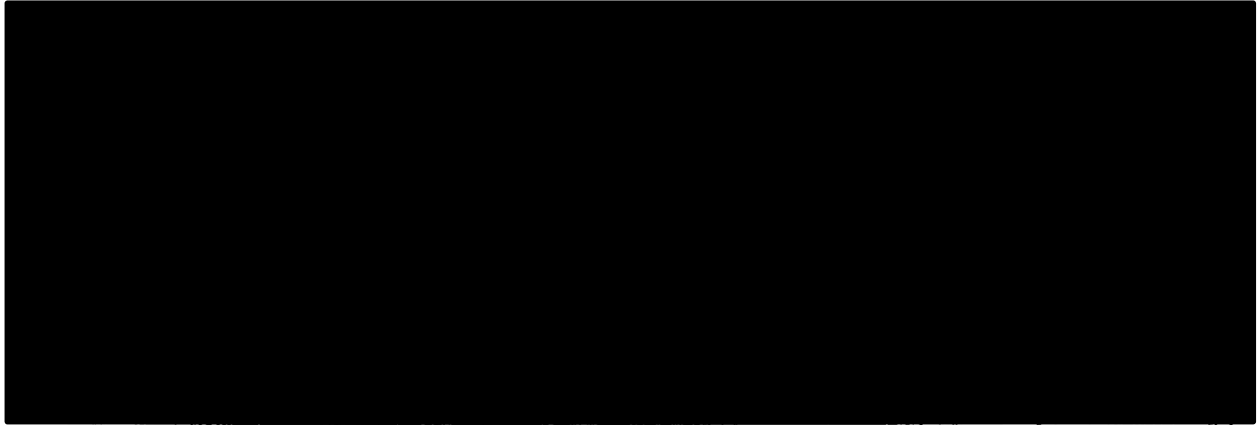
Figure 39: 'Bringing Up Father', *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 21 April 1915.

Other cultural references are used to similar effect in these and other strips. From thinking that a

Stradaverius is just an overpriced second-hand violin to wondering when the next Shakespeare is

due to come out, characters' ignorance of 'highbrow' culture is used to provoke a laugh. Ma and

Pa Perkins choose not to watch the movie version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, because they hate

animal pictures.[227] Lack of geographical knowledge leads *Polly and her Pals'* Delicia to think

that someone from the Canary Islands must be a good singer. [228] Jokes based on language are

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[225] 'Bringing Up Father', *Richmond Times Dispatch,* 21 April 1915.
[226] The joke was first used in 'Bringing Up Father', 20 December 1913, in the example above and then again in 'Bringing Up Father', *El Paso Herald,* 1 July 1918, and 21 January 1920. Hershfield used the same gag in 'Abie the Agent', *Portsmouth Daily Times,* 23 January 1928.
[227] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Lincoln Star,* 31 July 1922.
[228] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 16 March 1922.

commonplace. Jeff is surprised to hear that the victim of a homicide has been murdered in 1919 as he does not know the meaning of the term.[229] Jiggs believes recuperate to be a location and a chow-chow (a fashionable type of dog) to be something you eat.[230] Abie confuses auditorium with moratorium and does not know the meaning of the word acoustics.[231] The use of wordplay to add additional layers of humour to a strip without forming part of the storyline was practised regularly by George McManus, who tended to name occasional characters in relation to their personality or occupation (a Saxophonist called Professor B. Sharp and a socialite named Mrs. H. I. Brow are just two examples).[232]

While comic artists often used cultural discourse to create a feeling of intellectual and cultural superiority in the reader, the strips generally represented the middlebrow everyman rather than the cultural elite. Education, and particularly college education, was depicted as primarily the preserve of effeminate fops (like *Polly and Her Pals'* Ashur, who is studying a postgraduate course at Columbia but has absolutely no common sense) and served more as a finishing school than an educational institution. On the rare occasion that a college education is mentioned, it is to illustrate a lack of intellectual progress: the suitor who spent three years in the freshman year of college for example.[233] The strip that uses collegiate life as a setting the most often is *Mutt and Jeff*, who enjoy an extended - if farcical - career as college sportsmen in 1921 and 1929.[234] In the majority of examples, characters expressing a feeling of intellectual and cultural superiority are

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[229] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Boston Globe,* 30 October 1919, *Ada Evening News*, 3 August 1920.
[230] 'Bringing Up Father', *Richmond Times Dispatch,* 11 September 1922, *Corpus Christi Caller,* 22 August 1921.
[231] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 20 February 1918, *Washington Times,* 15 May 1919.
[232] 'Bringing Up Father', *El Paso Herald,* 12 September 1919, *Omaha Daily Bee,* 29 August 1915.
[233] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Marion Star,* 14 August 1930.
[234] 'Mutt and Keff', *Boston Globe* (29, 30 August 1921), *Sandusky Register* (16, 17, October 1929, 1, 2, 15 November 1929).

mocked – rejected by women, thrown out by unimpressed fathers or scorned by the women of the strip. Much like conspicuous consumption, in the world of the comic strip conspicuous intellectualism was something to be mocked and not admired.

Conclusion: class confusion in the comics

The comics produced in the first three decades of the twentieth century provide insight into a larger story of the consolidation of middle-class identity in this period. The world they portray is one that – at a superficial level at least – supports what Lawrence Samuel terms the 'national mythology of the 'Everyman''', which he argues is central to American national identity.[235] As Samuel explains, the very existence of both rich and poor contradicts the constitutional precept that all men are created equal, and throughout history citizens who do not belong to the middle class have been viewed with some suspicion, considered somehow as less American.[236] The strips' disassociation of the workplace from the definition of class status, coupled with the emphasis on consumer behaviour as a means of demonstrating social standing, served to perpetuate the idea that a middle-class lifestyle was attainable to a broad cross-section of the population. The fact that characters' fortunes were susceptible to such dramatic change but that these changes had little material impact on their lifestyle further reinforced this idea. In this regard, the comic strips provide a very similar picture to that found by Roland Marchand in his study of American advertising. Marchand uses the term 'Zerspeigel' – or 'fun mirror' – to

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[235] Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American Middle Class: A Cultural History* (New York, 2013), p. 5.
[236] Ibid., p. 5.

explain how adverts presented a distorted social reality in which a middle-class lifestyle was depicted as the social 'norm'.

Unlike adverts, however, the comics also pointed to the problems associated with society's universal pursuit of middle-class belonging. Far from suggesting that America in this period was a democracy of consumption in which class boundaries had become irrelevant, the strips actually highlighted the pervasiveness of underlying rules governing cultural and social hierarchies in the period. The preoccupation with cultural capital and class 'passing', the mockery of conspicuous consumption and the focus on gender behaviour all illustrate the prevalence and not the disappearance of hierarchical social boundaries. While the comics suggested a high degree of status anxiety with regard to class position there was very little evidence of any associated anxiety over white racial privilege – something that is explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Drawing Racial Boundaries in Black and White
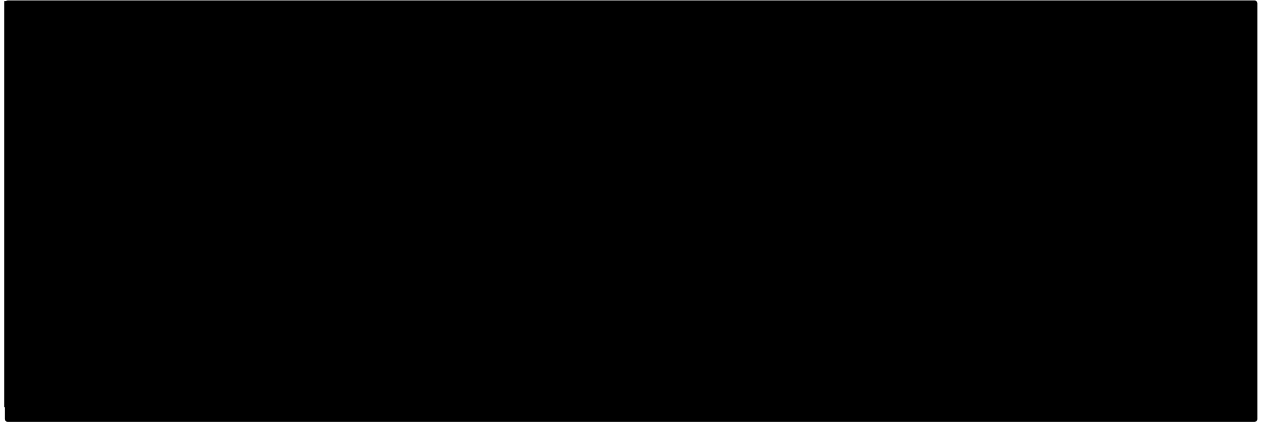
Figure 40: 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star,* 28 November 1924.

In the comic strip pictured above, a 1924 edition of *The Gumps*, Sidney Smith drew attention to the complex and interconnected nature of social hierarchy, racial discourse and the concept of American citizenship in the early twentieth century. Andy Gump, challenged by his wife Min on his behaviour in front of their refined and cultured friends the Nesbits, defends his position by conflating his own social rank with the situation of his ancestors and specifically their Pilgrim connection. Published a few short months after the passing of the Johnson-Reed Act, which set future immigration levels based on categorising the quality of immigrants in much the same way as Andy, the strip highlights some of the social tensions felt in the period. It also demonstrates the way in which the comics, perhaps surprisingly, used humour to undermine many of the tenets of the nativist discourse prevalent in the period, from hyper-patriotism to racial stereotyping.

The previous chapter explored the ways in which the comics in this period navigated discourse

on social hierarchies, gender identity and class culture, defining the American mainstream in

largely middle-class terms while also using satire to mock many of the traits associated with the

self-conscious mainstream. Large-scale demographic and political changes challenged

preconceived notions of social order and racial identity. Despite the Progressive-era fervour to

Americanise hordes of newly-arrived immigrants, and remake them as model Americans,

concerns over their fitness for American citizenship were often expressed in racial terms. The

suggestion that true assimilation was an impossible goal was common in academic discourse,

supported by a burgeoning literature that used eugenics to shore up racial prejudice. Amidst all

of this tension, a growing current of American nativism took on a religious and racial angle,

peaking in the years after World War One. The thirty years since Reconstruction had ended had

seen Jim Crow laws firmly take hold in the South, and the migration of thousands of free blacks

into northern cities, changing their racial demographic and often resulting in a kind of de-facto

spatial segregation of black and white areas. As hostility towards 'new' immigrants peaked, so

too did racial tensions towards blacks: the year 1919 brought with it a bloody summer of race

riots.[1]

This chapter explores the way in which the comics engaged with ideas about white ethnicity,

race and citizenship in the Progressive Era. It is a complex story. The comic strips in this study

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[1] The literature on this subject is enormous but a few noteworthy examples are Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (London, 1995); Dale T. Knobel, *America for the Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York; London, 1996); Jan Voogd, *Race Riots and Resistance: The Red Summer of 1919* (New York; Oxford, 2008); Michael Newton, *White Robes and Burning Crosses: A History of the Ku Klux Klan from 1866* (Jefferson N.C., 2016); John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick; London, 2002); Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon, *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights* (Princeton; Oxford, 2000).

contained little evidence of explicitly racist rhetoric (towards blacks) or nativist attitudes (towards white ethnics). Given the centrality of race to the period's nativist discourse, the public preoccupation with the 'immigrant problem' and the prevalence of everyday racism, this is really rather surprising. It is a significant finding of this research that the treatment of race in the comics undermines the arguments of historians who argue that this was a period of 'variegated whiteness', in which immigrants were seen as 'not quite white'.[2] The comics provide absolutely no evidence that the racial science of thinkers like Madison Grant, which defined national differences along physiological lines and saw certain white groups as superior to others on biological grounds, had found its way into the way that most everyday Americans thought about race. Indeed, the racial boundaries of the comics are drawn clearly between white normativity and black otherness.

It is also clear that this is not the story of a forward-thinking industry keen to address the age's racial prejudices. Rather, in their efforts to avoid offending potential readers or attract criticism, the artists of nationally syndicated comics inadvertently contributed to the definition of a white middle-class mainstream built on a very narrow racial and regional demographic, based on East Coast, WASP characteristics. The world according to the comic strips was therefore infused with racial hierarchy. While overt uses of racist humour was rare, the process of Othering was employed to draw an oppositional comparison with black characters – all of whom conformed to existing racial stereotypes – wherever they appeared in the strips.[3] And though rarely the subject

[2] For a thorough (if skeptical) summary of this school of historiography, see Peter Kolchin, 'Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America', *Journal of American History*, 89 (June 2002), pp. 154–173.
[3] 'Othering' is the process of defining one group against another, establishing one's own identity through opposition to and usually vilification of this Other.

of direct mockery, and never the target of specifically racial gags, white ethnics were excluded from the white mainstream of the comic page, meaning that the stark difference between blackness and whiteness was not complicated by the presence of white ethnicity. Immigrant characters appeared either in their own separate strips (like *Abie the Agent* and *Bringing Up Father*) or – very occasionally – as one-dimensional bit parts who did not interact with the WASP characters who featured in the strips.

Race in the Progressive era

There exists to-day a widespread and fatuous belief in the power of environment, as well as of education and opportunity to alter heredity.

~ Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, p. 13.

The descendant of the European immigrant changes his type even in the first generation almost entirely, children born not more than a few years after arrival of the immigrant parents in American developing in such a way that they differ in type essentially from their foreign-born parents.

~ *Report of the Dillingham Commission*, 1911, p. 44.

Race-thinking and nationalist discourse in the first few decades of the twentieth century was, in the words of scholar Nell Irvin Painter, 'a muddle'.[4] The Progressive-era fascination with race was the result of several large-scale demographic shifts in the later nineteenth century, which had dramatically altered the racial make-up of American society by the turn of the century. The first and most obvious of these changes was the reordering of Southern society after the Civil War, after the slave system upon which Southern economy and society had been built was summarily and abruptly ended. As support for Reconstruction waned, the segregation system, which relied on a set of customs and laws requiring African Americans to work in roles very similar to those occupied by slaves in the Antebellum South, structured racial oppression in the South. The premise of 'separate but equal', while inherently self-contradictory, meant that race continued to be the primary factor in ordering society and classifying Americans into different 'types' and those who refused to comply were punished. The changes in the South had far-reaching repercussions. The 1870s saw record numbers of Southern blacks and their children, frustrated by the limitations of the 'New South,' move North and West. As the nineteenth century drew to a close and the twentieth began, the number of black migrants continued to rise. In the 1920s, at the end of what has been termed the 'Great Migration', more than 750,000 African-Americans left the South - a greater movement of people than had occurred during the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s.[5] This level of racial diversification was unprecedented in Northern cities, and the result was not the intermingling of white and black, but instead the introduction of a system of de-facto segregation that separated Northern cities spatially on the same racial lines as the South, with housing and schools used to create entirely segregated communities.

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[4] Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York, 2010), p. 244
[5] Newton, *White Robes and Burning Crosses*, p. 44.

Furthermore, the same period had also seen a tremendous increase in the number of immigrants arriving in the United States. The 1900 census recorded the country's entire population as 76,303,387, of which 10,460,085 (around 14%) were foreign-born. These proportions remained consistent into the 1920s. By 1909 more than half of the children in the nation's 37 largest cities were either immigrants or the children of immigrants and in some places the figure was closer to three quarters.[6] While immigrants resettled across the entire United States, the concentration of European arrivals was highest in the cities close to the East Coast facilities through which they entered the country. New York, the main entry point, became known as the "Golden Door", the size of the city's foreign-born population almost quadrupling from 567,812 in 1870 to almost 2 million by 1910.[7]

The influx of immigrants in this era was characterised not solely by its size. The infamous 1911 report by the Dillingham Commission, set up to 'make full inquiry, examination, and investigation… into the subject of immigration', emphasised the significant change in the nature of immigration, noting that from around 1880, the vast majority of immigrants arriving had hailed from Southern Europe. It acknowledged that 'the widespread apprehension in the United States relative to immigration is chiefly due to this change in the character of the movement of population from Europe in recent years.' The report thus divided European immigration into 'two general classes' designated as the 'old' and the 'new' immigration. The former class included immigrants from England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Belgium, Denmark, France,

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[6] Roger Daniels, Not Like Us: Immigrants and Minorities in America, 1890-1924 (Chicago, 1997), p. 89.
[7] D. Gerber and A. Kraut, *American Immigration and Ethnicity: A Reader* (New York, 2016), p. 33.

Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. From 1819 to 1880, over 95% of immigrants from Europe to the United States came from these countries. The second class of 'new' immigrants came from Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Spain, and Turkey, and accounted for around 77% of European immigrants to America between 1901 and 1910.[8] This division between 'old' and 'new' immigration became code for 'worthy' and 'unworthy' immigrants, with the report emphasising that the new immigrants were largely unskilled and 'far less intelligent', had 'less progressive and advanced origins' and were slow to assimilate.[9] Significantly, the report also stated that 'racially they are for the most part essentially unlike the British, German, and other peoples who came during the period prior to 1880', and they were motivated to come by different ideals, 'for the old immigration came to be a part of the country, while the new, in a large measure, comes with the intention of profiting, in a pecuniary way, by the superior advantages of the new world and then returning to the old country'.[10]

As the *Dillingham Report* showed, race was no longer understood in a straightforward oppositional black-white binary based on skin colour, and grounded in the dichotomy between free whites and enslaved blacks. The 'new' immigrants, as free and as white-skinned as they were, also seemed inherently different to the 'old' stock of Northern European settlers who had, over time, come to represent the white American mainstream. This difference was sometimes attributed to nation of origin, again a fixed characteristic that was argued to be biologically determined. For many thinkers like Madison Grant (quoted above) certain 'races' of people were

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[8] 'Reports of the Immigration Commission: Emigration Conditions in Europe', (Washington, D.C, 1910, 1907).
[9] Ibid., p. 14.
[10] Ibid.

simply incompatible with American society, and should be prevented from entering at all, as there was no hope that they could be assimilated. Yet at the same time as nativists pointed out the fundamental unassimilability of certain immigrant groups, Progressive reformers organised Americanization drives, eager to encourage immigrants to 'become American' by shedding their old loyalties, clothes, tastes and habits, and embracing their new homeland. This process was given visual form in a pageant organised by the notoriously anti-immigrant Henry Ford:

> A giant cauldron sat in the middle. From one side, immigrant men and women in varied European peasant costumes, bearded, and wearing headscarves, approached. To the accompaniment of patriotic music they approached the giant cauldron and climbed in. A few minutes later they emerged clean-shaven, in simple American clothes with no headscarves.[11]

Throughout 1917 and 1918, state and city governments were persuaded to inaugurate hundreds of events to facilitate the Americanization of immigrants.[12] Both approaches had in common the expectation that some combination of biology and behaviour could be used to assess the worthiness of a person's civic identity, and that being a full American citizen was about more than skin colour.

This new approach to issues of immigration and race also had a newly scientific edge, based initially on the 'discoveries' of the eugenics movement in Britain, which seemed to show that

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[11] Daniels, *Not like us*, p. 93.
[12] Desmond S. King, Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy (Cambridge, Mass. London, 2002), p. 97.

both physical – and, more worryingly, moral – defects were hereditary.[13] This discovery, backed

up by statistical and scientific data newly available in the Progressive era, suggested that action

needed to be taken to prevent the propagation of these bad seeds, in order to 'ensure the common

protoplasmic good.'[14] Over the first decades of the twentieth century, in the heyday of white

supremacy supported by racial science, awareness of eugenic arguments pervaded American

society at a local level. Local eugenics groups such as the Galton Society and the Race

Betterment Foundation sprung up through the USA.[15] Eugenic ideas also became commonplace

in popular discourse: between 1910 and 1914, the 'general magazines' (as defined by Higham)

carried more articles on eugenics than on the three questions of slums, tenements, and living

standards combined.[16] At the same time, writers like Charles Davenport explicitly connected

eugenic theory with the 'problem' of immigration, suggesting that individuals and families with

poor hereditary history should be denied entry to the United States, as a means of protecting the

American stock from degenerates.[17] By the 1920s, when, eugenics courses were available in 350

colleges and universities, race theory and eugenics had been firmly linked, an argument most

famously outlined in Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*.[18] Legislation and

scientific articles addressing these issues ensured the place of scientific xenophobia in academic

and political expressions of nationhood.

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[13] Daniel J Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York, 1985), p. 71.
[14] Ibid., p. 48.
[15] Ibid., p. 59.
[16] Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, pp. 150–151.
[17] Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, p. 47.
[18] Ibid., p. 89.

While xenophobia, nativism and racism are hardly unique to America, they do appear to run in counter to the nation's founding ideals, a conflict that has been explored in excellent studies by Peter Schrag and Rogers Smith (among others).[19] John Higham's seminal text *Strangers in the Land* traced the nature and intensity of nationalism and ethnic prejudice in American society from 1860 to 1925, defining nativism as a defensive type of nationalist ideology that incorporated anti-Catholic attitudes, anti-Semitism and Anglo-Saxon racism and significantly influenced American thinking throughout the period he chronicled. Higham saw racism and nativism as slightly different impulses. Nativism differentiated between groups on the basis of who belonged to the nation: race could be one of the excluding criteria for this differentiation, but nativism could espouse assimilation, whereas racism could not.[20] As Maddalena Marinar points out, Higham contended that nativism existed because of the disproportionate share of power that a largely WASP middle class was able to exercise in American public discourse. Once the immigrants who had been targets of nativism gained political prominence, they began to influence the definition of the nation and of the meaning of being American.[21] Historians have debated the pervasiveness of this nativist discourse, not always agreeing on how far academic and political debates impacted upon popular culture. Timothy Meagher addresses this issue with his observation that Higham drew heavily on East Coast, middle-class journals that he called 'general magazines' (such as the *Atlantic Monthly* and *North American Review*) for evidence of nativism, but he made little or no attempt to explore the popular culture sources which

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[19] Rogers M. Smith, Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History (New Haven, 1997); Peter Schrag, Not Fit for Our Society: Immigration and Nativism in America (Berkeley, 2011).

[20] Alan Kraut, 'John Higham's Critique of His Own Work', *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 11 (April 2012), p. 277.

[21] Maddalena Marinar, ''An Acrid Odor of the 1920s is Again in the Air': The Strange Career of American Nativism and the Ongoing Relevance of John Higham's Strangers in the Land'', *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 11 (April 2012), p. 261.

'powerfully expressed and shaped attitudes about ethnic and racial groups, especially among the working-class whites underrepresented in *Strangers*.'[22]

There are many convincing examples of popular nativism that offer fairly resounding proof of the widespread reach of white supremacist thought in this period. One, of course, was the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915.[23] Branding itself as a militant defender of 'pure Americanism', it set out its stall against blacks, Catholics and Jews, as well as the more general threat of Bolshevism.[24] By 1922, despite high profile opposition in the press, the group had amassed over a million members – more than the entire population of Pennsylvania that same year.[25] The first decade of the twentieth century saw 'a burgeoning of racial violence', with riots in New York (1900), Springfield, Ohio (1904), Atlanta, Georgia and Greensburg, Indiana (1906), and Springfield, Illinois (1908).[26] A largescale riot in St. Louis in 1917 saw houses burned to the ground and men, women and children brutally murdered in the streets.[27] And then in the summer of 1919, as the "Red Scare" began to take hold, racial violence engulfed America, as a wave of riots, lynchings and racial conflicts swept across the country.[28]

Furthermore, large numbers of Americans enthusiastically welcomed the deeply racist Hollywood blockbuster *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, which extolled the virtue of the Ku Klux Klan

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[22] Meagher, 'Revisiting John Higham's Strangers in the Land: Comment', p. 285.
[23] Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford, 1995), p. 4.
[24] Ibid., p. 5.
[25] https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/second-klan/509468/ [last accessed 28th February 2019; Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1922,* (Washington Government Printing Office, 1923) p.35.
[26] William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (Chicago, 1970), p. 11.
[27] Ibid., p. 12.
[28] Jan Voogd, Race Riots and Resistance: The Red Summer of 1919 (New York, 2008), p. 1.

and shored up ideas about white privilege and racial purity.[29] There are fewer obvious examples of popular cultural products that openly or violently challenged the racial status of white immigrants, though some did engage with themes of immigration and belonging. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Thomas Edison Company created four silent films that portrayed Italian immigrants: *The European Rest* Cure (1904) The *Black Hand* (1906), *The Skyscrapers of New York* (1906), and *Her First Adventure* (1908).[30] In her analysis, Ilaria Serra found that, while there were occasional positive images of Italians in these films, the overriding message was negative, hinting at the threat that Italian immigrants posed to American purity.[31] However, she argues, in the decade that followed, movie depictions of Italians changed, in response to cultural awareness of Italians' efforts to assimilate and a desire not to offend this new segment of their audience.[32] Romanticising of the concept of Americanization also became a common cultural trope. In 1927, the first Hollywood movie to synchronize sound and picture, *The Jazz Singer*, featured a story about Jewish immigration, and the hard path trodden by its main character as he gained happiness and success in American society. The movie was a classic example of the cultural narrative of adaptation through acculturation, and did not engage explicitly with any racial thinking.[33] There is a large body of evidence to demonstrate the prevalence of questions about race, citizenship and immigration in both political and popular culture across the entire period.

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[29] James S. Olson and Heather Olson Beal, *The Ethnic Dimension in American History* (Chichester, 2011), p. 179.
[30] Ilaria Serra, *The Imagined Immigrant: Images of Italian Emigration to the United States Between 1890 and 1924* (Madison, 2009), p. 103.
[31] Ibid., p. 107.
[32] Ibid., p. 108.
[33] Elliott Robert Barkan, *Immigrants in American History: Arrival, Adaptation, and Integration* (Oxford, 2013), p. 465.

Perhaps surprisingly, in the comics examined for this study, there is very little evidence of

explicit racist rhetoric, expression of white anxiety or nativist, anti-immigrant feeling at any

point over the first three decades of the twentieth century. The debates of academics, politicians

and eugenics experts are conspicuously absent from the funny papers, and it is difficult to detect

any obvious undercurrent of racial sensitivity or anxiety about white ethnics and immigrants in

even the subtext of the strips. This does not, however, appear to be because of any degree of

progressive racial thinking or concerted effort to challenge prevailing racist views. Indeed, the

race-neutrality' of the comics syndication industry played a role in the continuing cultural

processes that shored up white privilege and black oppression throughout the twentieth century.[34]

There are several possible reasons for the relative absence of racial discourse, so central to

academic and political culture of the period, on the comic page. The fact that the strips were

designed to be light-hearted and not particularly thought-provoking provides a degree of

explanation, but the potential social function of humour to soothe social anxieties and promote

group solidarity through laughing at others would suggest that this is not in itself sufficient

reason.[35]

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[34] Kimberlee Crenshaw, 'Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory', *Connecticut Law Review,* Vol. 43, No. 5 (p1260)
[35] For extensive discussion on the traditional theory of humour as a safety valve, see Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously* (December 2003), which explains the argument that one of the primary functions of humour is to allow the mention of taboo or sensitive subjects in such a way as to allow relief.

Much like in the movies, the majority of documentary evidence suggests that the comics industry

was guided not by the individual views and sensibilities of the comic artists (some of whom were

immigrants themselves) but the requirement to provide cartoons that would meet the approval of

the syndicate bosses, who answered to the newspaper editors across the country was likely the

largest factor. We know, for example, that Joseph Pulitzer (himself an immigrant) implemented a

strict policy at the New York World banning vicious caricatures of Jews, blacks or other

marginalised groups in the comic strips of his papers (and later syndicate). Pulitzer's guidance

was that ethnic-based humour was still permissible, and even encouraged, as long as it was not

deemed to be overly vicious or one-dimensional.[36] The positioning of that line, the crossing of

which would be defined as being harmful, was markedly different for the portrayal of blacks to

that of white ethnics.

The perception of this distinction between harmful and non-harmful ethnic humour, probably

made by hundreds of comic artists, syndicate employees and newspaper editors on a daily basis,

structured the way that the comics navigated discourses on race and nationalism. Ultimately, the

picture they presented was of a white American mainstream, in which black and white ethnic

characters were, through distancing, stereotyping and omission, not included. As such, the

comics helped to reinforce what Bonilla-Silva calls 'deep whiteness' – the entrenched superiority

complex of white people that is reinforced through years of living in a white supremacist

world.[37] By naturalising middle-class whiteness as the norm, the strips ensured the interest

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[36] Soper, 'From Swarthy Ape to Sympathetic Everyman and Subversive Trickster', p. 270.
[37] E. Bonilla-Silva, 'More than Prejudice: Restatement, Reflections and New Directions in Critical Race Theory', *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity,* Vol 1, No. 1 (2015) p81.

convergence of white readers, as the middle-class lifestyle that was depicted in the strips was depicted as aspirational for working-class Caucasians, but unattainable for blacks.[38]

The 'line' was drawn differently for blacks and white ethnics. In the strips, there was a conspicuous absence of meaningful black characters, with anyone identifiable as a white ethnic firmly segregated to the confines of their own micro-societies, which found form in separate 'ethnic' strips like *Abie the Agent* and *Bringing Up Father*. This trend was mirrored in the movie industry: in 1924, the Hays Office, in an attempt to reduce offensive ethnic humour and name-calling on the big screen, set out a series of rules including banning 'miscegenation'. As a result, as Thomas Cripps argues, there was a complete lack of meaningful interaction between black and white characters in the movies.[39]

Like the Hays Office, in their keenness to avoid coming down on the wrong side of the race issue, comics syndicates (probably largely unwittingly) effectively replicated Jim Crow on the comics page; normalising separate and unequal, and perpetuating the ordering of America society on racial grounds. While the strips did not contain a significant amount of nativist, xenophobic or racist rhetoric, their narrow depiction of normative whiteness nevertheless reinforced the validity of these ideas long into the 1930s. The era's obsession with racial and biological hierarchies was played out not through the vilification of white ethnics, or by translating intellectual discourse into jokes to be consumed by the comics' readers. Instead, the comics defended the racial privilege of middle-class White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans

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[38] Bonilla-Silva, 'More than Prejudice', p.82, see also chapter 2.
[39] Thomas Cripps, Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942 (Oxford; New York, 1977), p. 145.

by excluding white ethnics and utilising black characters and jokes structured around a binary definition of race to reinforce white superiority, black inferiority and white ethnic otherness.

Whiteness

On 28th July 1922, Abe Kabibble (of Harry Hershfield's *Abie the* Agent) is pictured sitting on a train. He begins a conversation with the fellow next to him, who he thinks is an acquaintance called Callahan. He is mistaken, for this man is in fact not Callahan but Donovan. Funnily enough, Donovan had mistaken Abe for someone else too: a fellow called Ginsberg.[40] This exchange between the two men highlights two points. Firstly, the importance of names in signalling a person's nationality and second, the idea that national background (in this case, Jewish and Irish) could be determined without speaking to someone, based purely on physical appearance. The ethnic origins of comic characters only become relevant if their audience can be expected to identify them instantly, based on the frame of reference they have learnt subconsciously through absorption in other visual media. As Tom Holt argues, it is through these everyday actions and interactions that race is reproduced: through the marking of racial 'others' racist ideas are naturalized and made self-evident, and thus seemingly beyond audible challenge.[41] This applies not only to the construction of black stereotypes associated with African Americans and tied to the heritage of slavery, but also to the European immigrants whose racial fitness was challenged by nativist discourse.

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[40] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times*, 28 July 1922.
[41] Thomas C. Holt, 'Marking Race, Race-Making, and the Writing of History', *The American Historical Review*, 100 (1995), p. 7.

Mindful of the differentiation of different European immigrant groups according to their racial desirability, an entire school of 'whiteness' historians have sought to understand what race meant for the Eastern and Southern Europeans who entered the States in this period, asking whether they were seen as fully white, and by extension, what the term 'whiteness' represented during a time when race-thinking was in such a state of flux. Matthew Frye-Jacobson's seminal *Whiteness of a Different Color* argued for three distinct chronological periods in terms of how race in general, and whiteness in particular, was understood in America. In his first period, from the 1790s to the 1840 when slavery structured Southern society and immigration levels were relatively low, Americans held a binary understanding of black and white, in which people were clearly one or the other. Then, the mid 1800s to the 1920s saw the development of 'variegated whiteness', with some groups better or 'whiter' than others. Finally, from around the 1920s, after immigration restriction legislation all but halted migration, skin colour resurfaced as the primary determinant of racial identity, with the so-called Caucasian race now seen to contain many different nationalities previously deemed racially deficient.[42]

Following Jacobson's suit, numerous scholars sought to situate the experience of newly arrived immigrants in a whiteness framework, creating a narrative by which these groups sought to 'become white' (rather than become American) in a society that viewed them as 'not-quite white'. Notable examples are Noel Ignatiev's provocatively titled *How the Irish Became White* (1995), Thomas Guglielmo's *White on Arrival*, and David Roediger's *Working Toward*

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[42] Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).

Whiteness.[43] All of these works, to some extent, follow a 'wop to white' framework, seeking to explain actions by and hostility towards Eastern and Southern European immigrants in terms of white identity: opponents questioned their whiteness, and the immigrants sought to 'act' white in order to fit into American society.[44] Eager to apply this framework to *Abie the Agent*, a prizewinning article by Richard Moss outlined how Hershfield's strip acted out racial anxiety on the comics page, explaining Abe's every move as an attempt by Hershfield to demonstrate Abe's – and by extension American Jews' collective – whiteness.[45] This piece does not stand up to a more extensive analysis of Hershfield's strips. Indeed, if anything, Hershfield showed a relaxed ambivalence to nativist discourse, despite the prevalence of anti-Semitic forces across all reaches of American society. He was comfortable enough in Abe's (and his own) identity as an American to subvert and extend Jewish caricatures, and in doing so created a much gentler Jewish American character that would ultimately influence a generation of Americans' views on their Jewish counterparts. [46]

Their combination of both words - in particular words representing speech - and pictures made comics a unique format for creating instantly recognisable ethnic and racial tropes. White ethnics are very clearly designated when they do appear in the strips, with their difference from the American mainstream marked in several ways. However, there is absolutely no suggestion in any of the strips in this study that the immigrant characters, when they did appear, were anything

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[43] Noel Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White (New York, 1995); Thomas A. Guglielmo, White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890 - 1945 (Oxford, 2004); David R. Roediger, Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White; The Strange Journey From Ellis Island To The Suburbs (New York, NY, 2006).
[44] Guglielmo, *White on Arrival*, p. 7.
[45] Moss, 'Racial Anxiety on the Comics Page'.
[46] For further elaboration, see Fraser, 'Immigrants, Ethnic Humour and the Newspaper Comic Strip', which takes the opposite stance to Richard Moss, arguing that there is very little evidence of racial anxiety present in *Abie the Agent.*

other than racially white. Furthermore, despite Jacobson's (and others') argument of a pervasive sense of 'variegated whiteness' that only started to disappear in the 1920s, the comics continued to define race in binary black and white terms consistently throughout the period. As Peter Kolchin, a critic of the whiteness school, pointed out in a forum on the subject, 'Americans have had many ways of looking down on people without questioning their whiteness.'[47] While comic artists undeniably operated inside the constraints of existing ethnic caricatures, there is little material enabling a connection to a defence – or attack – of a white identity that excluded the new immigrants.

In the three comics featuring white ethnic characters, racial identity is immediately distinguishable. This process of 'marking' involved a combination of some or all of the following techniques: language and linguistics, physical characteristics and naming. Dialect humour, which had become the 'staple' of American comedy, had been used successfully in both vaudeville and burlesque to indicate the presence of immigrant characters around the turn of the century.[48] Rudolph Dirks, Richard Outcault and Harry Hershfield used linguistics as a means of quickly demonstrating where their protagonists came from, particularly in the earliest strips. The characters in the *Katzenjammer Kids* all speak in a clearly German dialect, with the "th" sound replaced by "d", so that "the" becomes "der", "this" becomes "dis", and so on. Happy Hooligan's exaggerated pronunciation of certain words clearly marks him out as Irish: he says "youse" for you, "mudder and brudder" for mother and brother and "soitenly" for certainly throughout his comics career. Similarly, Abie's Jewish European heritage is highlighted by his

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[47] Kolchin, 'Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America', p. 165.
[48] Wes D. Gehring, *Groucho and W.C. Fields: Huckster Comedians* (Jackson, Miss., 1994), p. 33.

excessively forced vowel sounds; "spick" and "ebsolute" replace "speak" and "absolute" in his dialect (but, interestingly, rarely in the speech bubbles of the other Jewish characters in the strip). Abe's heavy accent was not dulled over time; it remained consistent right up until the strip ended its run in the 1930s.

By contrast, George McManus did not use linguistic devices as a means of marking out Jiggs and Maggie as Irish. Jiggs physical appearance was the key to his ethnic identity, with McManus employing virtually every element of the pervasive Irish stereotypes popularised in the nineteenth century. Jiggs has ape-like posture, a low, slanting forehead (indicating a small frontal lobe – the part of the brain responsible for rational, civilised thought and behaviour), an extended jaw (another sign of evolutionary backwardness) and a small, upturned nose.[49] Hershfield, too, used physical markers to immediately identify Abie as a Jew. Political cartoonists had built on centuries of tradition of depicting Jews as physically inferior with big noses, tufts of hair and beards, flat feet and bow legs, often overdressed for any given situation.[50] Abie was created in line with this tradition: a small, squat man with dark features, a large nose and bow legs. The only time Abe was not seen in a suit was when he was in water or fancy dress. Other characters in *Abie the Agent* also possess physical markers inkeeping with anti-Semitic stereotypes. In particular, Abe's business rival Benny Sparkbaum, whose heavy-lidded eyes, stooping shoulders and hook nose immediately invoked the sinister Jewish caricatures recognisable in Shylock or Fagin.

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[49] Soper, 'From Swarthy Ape to Sympathetic Everyman and Subversive Trickster', p. 263.
[50] John Appel, 'Jews in American Caricature: 1820-1914', *American Jewish History*, 71 (1981), pp. 107–8.
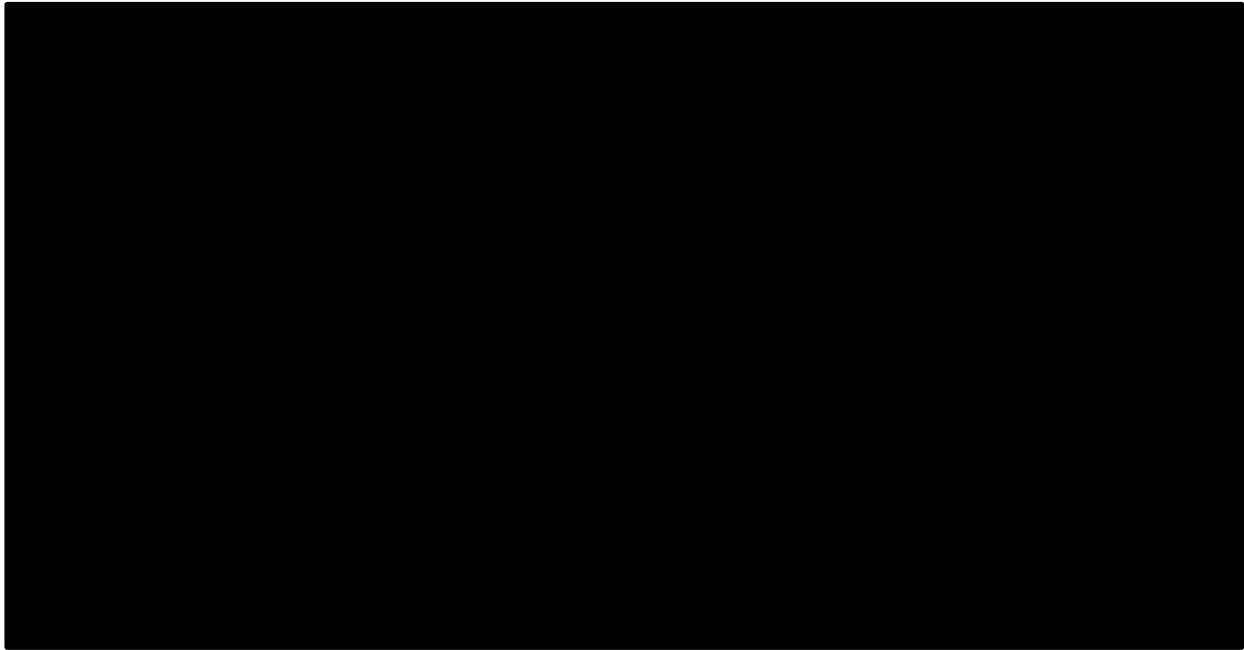
Figure 41: 'Abie the Agent', *Capital Times,* 10 March 1924

Figure 42: 'Bringing Up Father', *Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 February 1913.

Finally, ethnic names are used as a marker by both Hershfield and McManus. Abe's associates include Minsk, Sparkbaum, Siegfried and Ginsberg. Jiggs drinks at Dinty Moore's, and hangs out (much to Maggie's disapproval) with Clancy, Monahan and O'Malley. In the early 1920s, Harry Hershfield actively engages with the subject of 'immigrant' names in several strips that focus on the practice of name-changing, something that was common amongst Jewish immigrants in particular in the decades after World War One.[1] In 1922, Abe's friend Ginsberg is thinking about changing his name; for "certain reasons" he had the court change it to Callahan. Abe suggests he should now change it to Murphy, because people will ask him what it was before he changed it.[2] In this instance, Hershfield hints at the challenges faced by American Jews in the 1920s. He also contrasts the position of Jews and Irish in two ways: first, the fact that

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[1] Kirsten Fermaglich, *A Rosenberg by Any Other Name: A History of Jewish Name Changing in America* (New York, 2018).
[2] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 26 April 1922.

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Ginsberg - who is clearly Jewish - has chosen an Irish name suggests that he feels he could 'pass' as Irish; second, in choosing an Irish name, he implied that Americans of Irish descent did not face the same challenges that those from Jewish communities did.

In the strips, while white ethnics were marked as identifiably distinct from the WASP American mainstream, this distinction was linked to their national heritage with no suggestion that they lacked whiteness in any biological sense. Chapter 2 has explored the way that all of the strips in the sample explored ideas around class passing and status anxiety, concluding that the comics highlighted the tensions around whether making certain lifestyle choices was enough to gain membership of the middle class. Some whiteness scholars would argue that these tensions should be viewed as part of the wider racial anxiety experienced by white ethnics. Brigit Rasmussen has noted for example that 'whiteness might be partially or primarily conceived of as pale skin. In other popular discourses, race might be perceived as a set of behavioural characteristics: performing well in school or playing hockey or golf could be considered ways of "acting white"'.[3] This is certainly the approach taken by Richard Moss in his analysis of *Abie the Agent*.[4] However, the comparative aspect of my research undermines this argument. Protagonists in all of the strips in the sample – white ethnic and WASP alike – demonstrate a desire to fit in to the middle-class mainstream. Race theorists have unequivocally proven the role that popular culture has played in defining that mainstream, and the practices within it, as 'naturally' white. However, across the comic strips in this sample, there was no noticeable difference in the way

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[3] Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Irene J Nexica, Eric Klineberg, and Matt Wray, eds., *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (Durham, 2001), p. 8.
[4] Richard Moss, 'Racial Anxiety on the Comics Page: Harry Herschfield's 'Abie the Agent,' 1914-1940,' *The Journal of Popular Culture,* Volume 40, Issue 1 (Feb 2007).

that white ethnic and WASP characters engaged with white culture. Certainly, by depicting

certain American pursuits as solely the purview of the white middle-class community (see

chapter 2) the strips helped to strengthen the conflation between civic belonging and race,

specifically whiteness. However, it is only black characters that are explicitly excluded from this

group. White ethnics do not feature alongside WASPs, thus are neither included in nor excluded

from the activities of the white mainstream.

The comic industry of the Progressive era sharply delineated class culture along racial lines,

clearly excluding non-white characters from participating in the middle-class culture occupied by

the white protagonists in the strips. There is very little racial ambiguity on the comic page. Skin

colour serves as the primary reference point to identify racial difference, with white ethnics all

but disappearing from view in all but the strips in which they are the protagonists (*Abie the Agent*

and *Bringing Up Father*, and to a lesser extent, *Happy Hooligan*). These findings do not detract

from the fact that in this particular epoch in American history, there was no one universally

agreed racial schema. Race was in itself a muddled term and at times combined elements of skin

colour, other biological features, country of origin, religion, cultural habit and even social

position. However, on the comic page at least, the binary definition of whiteness constructed in

opposition to blackness was maintained throughout the period. Immigration and immigrants

were treated as something separate from mainstream America, shoring up immigrants' inferior

position in the social hierarchy without defining this positioning in explicitly racial terms. Far

from demonstrating social fear of or hostility towards immigrants, comic artists often subtly

ridiculed the hyper-patriotism that characterised nativist discourse. The treatment of immigrants

by the strips, while limited, ultimately undermined the idea that white ethnics were racially

inferior, or that their cultural differences should be understood in terms of black vs. white. However, the separation of recognisably ethnic characters into a different genre ultimately reinforced the message that immigrants – unless fully assimilated to the point that they were no longer recognisably ethnic anyway – were not part of the American mainstream. The comics' treatment of three topics is used to explore this complex process of navigation: immigration and ancestry, World War One and hyper-patriotism, and literacy

Immigration and ancestry

Between 1848 and 1936, immigration appeared as an issue in at least one of the major party's platforms in every single presidential campaign.[5] Both Nell Irvin Painter and Rita Simon have noted a public 'wave of fascination' with settlement houses and immigration, in popular culture from magazines and print culture to vaudeville and the theater.[6] Richard Outcault's flagship strip *The Yellow Kid,* whose storylines had taken place in the ethnic slums of New York, had bridged the gap between editorial cartoons and 'funny papers' during the three years it appeared, engaging with political concerns about the nature of immigrant living conditions in urban centres (see chapter one). After the demise of the strip in 1898, however, nothing similar appeared to take its place. Peter Conolly-Smith has suggested that the island setting of the comic *The Katzenjammer Kids*, which hundreds of early strips featured, 'may well have been interpreted as an allegorical version of Ellis Island', due to its simultaneous promise of abundance, and threat

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[5] Rita J. Simon, *Public Opinion and the Immigrant: Print Media Coverage, 1880-1980* (Lexington, Mass, 1985), p. 16.
[6] Painter, *The History of White People*, p. 242.

of perpetual confinement.[7] But there is no specific evidence that this was Dirks' intention, either in the content of the comic or in contemporary writing about it. In fact, despite the heightened public awareness of immigration, and the associated questions of immigrant assimilation, racial categorisations and social hierarchies, the topic was very rarely mentioned explicitly by the comic artists in this study. Of around 25 individual strips that referenced the issue of immigration, or social hierarchy based on ancestry, only slightly over half were published between 1915 and 1926, during the period when social and political focus on the issue was most heightened.

Those strips that depicted immigrants or engaged with the idea of immigration more generally did so with a faintly negative tone: in 1915 Abe Kabibble (himself of immigrant background) criticises the 'new' immigrants, saying they care only for money and 'underhend work'.[8] Jiggs refers to the condition of the tenements in 1922, and in 1925, Mutt and Jeff go and watch a ship full of Russian immigrants arriving at the port.[9] The 'swarthy' new arrivals all sport extremely bushy beards and moustaches, a fact which is used to construct the punchline of the strip, with Jeff concluding that Russia must be a living hell for barbers. In *Home Sweet Home* (later renamed *The Bungle Family)* George Bungle is caught up in a 'battle of all nations' when he accidentally eats at a cafe frequented by diners speaking in Polish, Russian and 'Mexican'.[10] In all of these examples, the comics engage with popular criticisms of immigrants (their willingness

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[7] Peter Conolly-Smith, 'Transforming an Ethnic Readership Through "Word and Image": William Randolph Hearst's "Deutsches Journal" and New York's German-Language Press, 1895—1918', *American Periodicals*, 19 (2009), pp. 66–84.
[8] 'Abie the Agent', *Omaha Daily Bee*, 5 December 1915.
[9] 'Bringing Up Father', *Washington Times,* 26 November 1922, 'Mutt and Jeff', *Portsmouth Daily Times,* 27 March 1925.
[10] 'Home Sweet Home', *Lincoln Star,* 14 January 1926.

to undercut native American workers, their living conditions, their personal hygiene and their

potential criminality) but stop short of taking a clear anti-immigrant stance. In the *Abie the Agent*

strip where Abe criticizes the unpatriotic nature of the new immigrants and their willingness to

carry out underhand work, his outburst is triggered by a (presumably immigrant) waiter swiping

Abe's chair to give to a new customer while Abe stands for the star spangled banner.[11] The

humour here is multifaceted and subtle. Abe's diatribe contained many of the concerns used by

the Dillingham Commission and other high profile authorities in the period to argue for measures

to restrict immigration. Yet the fact that Abe's reasons are so personal and so petty undermines

the argument he makes, poking fun at anti-immigrant rhetoric rather than enforcing it.

The topic of ancestry, inextricably linked to the issue of immigration restriction, was also used

playfully by comic artists in the strip to engage with and often subvert nativist rhetoric without

actively endorsing or criticising it. In 1924, the year of the Johnson-Reed Act, Andy Gump used

language in keeping with the political discourse of the day, pompously describing himself as 'a

native-born white male citizen of this country'.[12] In the comic featured at the start of this chapter

(figure 40) Andy boasts of his ancestors' Pilgrim roots. This comedic construct was used on

numerous occasions, with both main and subsidiary characters boasting of the quality of their

family tree, claiming that they could trace it right back to their ancestors' arrival on the

Mayflower. On every occasion, the wind is taken out of the proverbial sails of the person seeking

to defend their elite social position on the basis of WASP racial privilege. In a *Mutt and Jeff* strip

in 1925, Mutt's proclamations that his ancestors came over on the Mayflower do not impress

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[11] 'Abie the Agent', *Omaha Daily Bee,* 5 December 1915.
[12] 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star,* 19 January 1924.

Jeff, whose grandfather cleaned up a roll in September Wheat![13] When an aristocratic lady tells Jiggs her family came over on the Mayflower, he misunderstands the significance, asking her genially if she was seasick on the journey.[14] This joke, which was repeated by McManus on three separate occasions with very little variation, could be taken as meting out mockery towards either attitude. Jiggs' lack of awareness of the significance of the Mayflower could be taken as evidence of fundamental Irishness, displaying a lack of patriotism and civic awareness that indicated a failure to fully Americanise. On the other hand, however, Jiggs' response to the boasting undercuts its significance, trivialising its message. Indeed on one of the occasions that the joke appears, Jiggs' response to a man telling him that his ancestors arrived with the Pilgrims is to try and one-up him by saying that he, Jiggs, came over on the same boat as Charlie Chaplin.[15] Again, this set-up, in which Jiggs equates the passage of the pilgrims with the arrival of a boat during the height of immigration in the early 1900s, is layered with ambivalence and could be taken as evidence of either the ignorance of Jiggs, or as a gentle reminder of the fundamental hypocrisy of the nativist attitudes being championed by his companion. Interestingly, despite the dramatic reduction of immigration levels after the 1924 legislation, on the few occasions that they appear, the nature of the jokes about ancestry remain consistent well into the 1930s.

Immigrant characters

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13 'Mutt and Jeff', *Ada Evening News*, 19 November 1920.
14 'Bringing Up Father', *El Paso Herald*, 25 May 1917.
15 'Bringing Up Father', *East Oregonian,* 26 April 1922.

The comics in this study, surprisingly, rarely include any identifiably 'ethnic' supplementary characters, despite the heightened level of interest in the 'immigrant question' in the period, and the fact that the majority of the strips are set either in New York or near other urban centres with large immigrant populations. On very rare occasions, either an ethnic name or exaggerated dialect is used to highlight the presence of a character of foreign origin, such as an Italian apple seller, Polish piano teacher or German shopkeeper. Sometimes this is accompanied by a joke constructed around the ethnicity of the character. Pa Perkins is not keen on Polly's Italian suitor, for example, because he fears he will want to eat spaghetti three times a day and Jiggs' heavily moustached friend Caponi is enlisted to help translate the opera for Maggie as his Italian is better than his English.[16] In *Mutt and Jeff,* Jeff congratulates a newly married couple with impossibly long Polish-sounding names on reducing two names into one.[17] Overall however, ethnic names almost never crop up in the other comics in the study - the single occasion that Polly Perkins goes for dinner with Reba Pearlman (off-page, she is never pictured) standing out as one of only a few instances where the cast of mainstream strips like *Polly and Her Pals* and *The Gumps* socialised with characters clearly identified as immigrants.[18]

In strips featuring white ethnic protagonists, comic artists worked within the limitations of the period, creating characters whose immigrant background provided humour without sinister undertones, and adapting long-held racial caricatures into gentler stereotypes. In Abe Kabibble, Harry Hershfield deliberately created a protagonist who was recognisably Jewish in a cultural

[16] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Hamilton Evening Journal,* 30 May 1925; 'Bringing Up Father', *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 27 May 1916.
[17] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Ada Evening News*, 19 August 1920.
[18] 'Polly and Her Pals', *South Bend Daily News Times,* 3 April 1915.

sense, but whose Jewishness did not contain any obvious religious connotations. Abe is delighted

to celebrate Christmas every year, even seeking to dress up as Santa for his young nephew.[19]

When another member of his Jewish club, Nate Ninoox, fails to send him a Christmas card, Abe

is much affronted and stops talking to him.[20] There is no suggestion that he or any of his friends

or family observe Jewish festivals or abstain from working on the Sabbath. References to Israel

and Zionism are subtle and infrequent: in 1926 and 1927 Abe attends charity events relating to

Israeli orphans.[21] Ultimately, Abe is cast as an upwardly mobile, fully Americanized immigrant.

His Jewishness is behavioural, linked primarily to stereotypes around money. There is never any

suggestion that his ethnic identity prevents him from fully embracing his American one, or that

he is anything less than a patriotic American citizen. Indeed, his willingness to consume is a key

element of many storylines. His character is sympathetic, appealing to readers who would have

enjoyed laughing at his foibles while still sympathising - and probably on occasion empathising -

with his predicaments.[22] Over the course of his career on the comic page, Abe's personality does

not really change. Even though Hershfield deliberately created Abe to soften and counteract the

harsher Jewish stereotypes of the vaudeville stage, he did not obviously react to the heightened

anti-Semitism prevalent in the late 1910s and early 1920s.

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[19] 'Abie the Agent', *El Paso Herald,* 24 December 1915.
[20] 'Abie the Agent', *Portsmouth Daily Times,* 26 January 1926.
[21] 'Abie the Agent', *Portsmouth Daily Times,* 3 March 1926 & 15 March 1927.
[22] For a more detailed discussion of the way in which Harry Hershfield and George McManus engaged with Jewish and Irish stereotypes, see Hilary Fraser, 'Immigrants, Ethnic Humour and the Newspaper Comic Strip'. In this study I examined the way that Hershfield operated within the constraints of recognisable Jewish caricatures, especially the Shylock trope, but moulded Abie as a sympathetic and much softer version. Abe's desire to engage in America's consumer culture is balanced with his natural stinginess and excessive concern over wasting money. Hershfield also contrasted Abe to other members of the Jewish community – such as his long-time rival Mendel Minsk – who exhibited behaviour much more in keeping with the Shylock tradition. In doing so, Hershfield was able to emphasise Abe's positive traits but did rely on anti-Semitic caricature to do so.

Similarly, in *Bringing Up Father,* the juxtaposition of the Irish working-class Jiggs and Maggie, and their new elite WASP social circle serves to demonstrate the endurance of their roots, with Jiggs never able to feel at home in society, hankering after his Irish pals (designated thus by their ethnic monikers). Kerry Soper has argued that Jiggs' 'persistent Irishness' is the main point of his character, and the widespread awareness of the fact that George McManus (his creator) was also Irish only served to reinforce Jiggs' ethnic identity.[23] Furthermore, his behaviour fell within a limited range of laughable habits associated with Irish stereotypes: garrulity, drunkenness, laziness, violence and stupidity.[24] At other times, however, Soper acknowledges that Jiggs served to represent a more general 'working-class hero', tapping into contemporary male fears about 'the supposedly emasculating effects of white collar work, the domestic sphere, and high society.' Pointing to the complex combination of class, race and gender in creating and defining social identities, he argues that as the males that Jiggs' wife Maggie tended to admire and favour were effeminate musicians and social types, Jiggs' continual abuse of these fellows, may have 'proved for some anxious male readers the superiority of uncultivated masculinity to effeminate sophistication'.[25]

In fact, the combined impact of the strips in this study is to create a tightly defined middle-class American mainstream in which white ethnic characters are only included once they have Americanized to such an extent that they are no longer identifiable as having roots in another culture at all. This supports the argument that white ethnics' difference could be overcome by embracing American life and assimilating into (white) American culture, whereas blackness as

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[23] Soper, 'From Swarthy Ape to Sympathetic Everyman and Subversive Trickster', p. 290.
[24] Ibid., p. 264.
[25] Ibid., p. 294.

difference is unquestioned. This treatment mirrors the finding of Roland Marchand in his study of advertising across a similar period; he observes that immigrants were not modern enough to be allowed a place in consumer society. 'To immigrants', Marchand concludes, 'the message of advertising was implicit: only by complete fusion into the melting pot did one gain a place in the idealized American society of the advertising pages.'[26] In the comic world too, there is virtually no intermingling of American and immigrant characters and no complicated cross-cultural love stories took place. Ethnic characters - like Abe Kabibble and Jiggs and Maggie - were defined by their immigrant background, and confined to the micro-societies of their own strips. These strips created rich and complicated characters, whose attempts to find their place in American society provided much of their content. However, these experiences were crafted in such a way as to emphasise the fundamental separateness of enduring immigrant communities. While comic artist Harry Hershfield described the supplementary Jewish characters in *Abie the Agent* as being just average New Yorkers, their Jewishness is brought to the fore by their names and appearance, if not their behaviour.[27] The fact that Abe's entire social circle is made up of men and women with Jewish names, who frequent a Jewish fraternal organisation and shop at locally owned shops like 'Ginsberg and Company' reinforces the idea of the Jewish community as separate from, rather than integrated into, the white American mainstream. While there was no real suggestion in the strips that immigrant characters were dangerous or even racially inferior, it is clear that they are different; anyone identifiably ethnic does not fit into the vision of the white middle-class mainstream crafted on the comic page.

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[26] Roland Marchand, Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920 - 1940 (Berkeley, 1985), p. 193.
[27] Herschfield, 'National Cartoonist Society Interviews'.

The comics navigated competing discourses over the best way to absorb immigrants into the American mainstream, creating a kind of middle ground between the idea that white ethnics could, through intense Americanization efforts, be assimilated into mainstream American culture and the arguments of prominent racial scientists that the new immigrants were fundamentally and biologically different: racially inferior and not capable of participating as citizens. For readers of the comics, ethnic characters could serve several purposes. Their creation within the established parameters of ethnic caricature (both in terms of physical attributes and their behaviours) meant that they were unthreatening to those who viewed immigrants as a problem. Laughing at their 'ethnic' behaviour would have provided white Americans with a sense of superiority and control.

The fact that identifiable white ethnics were clearly designated as 'other' also served to reinforce racial hierarchies that drew distinctions among whites. The ability to clearly identify this ethnic 'other', even as they lived in American society and worked as fruit-sellers and restaurateurs, might also have provided a level of reassurance. The fact that immigrant characters were in such a minority on the comic page could be taken either as evidence of public discomfort (comic artists and syndicates considered it too controversial and difficult a subject to make humorous) or lack of discomfort (comic artists and syndicates did not see any real mileage in ethnic jokes, preferring to focus on other more pertinent topics). Given the high degree of continuity in the treatment of white ethnic characters over the entire period of the study, the latter explanation seems more convincing. There was no significant identifiable change in the use of immigrant characters in the comics to coincide with the Immigration Restriction Acts of 1917-1924, the Red Scare or World War One. In fact, the treatment of all of these topics by comic artists tended

towards the light-hearted, satirising alarmist, excessive patriotism rather than seeking to reinforce it.

World War One, super-patriotism and the Red Scare
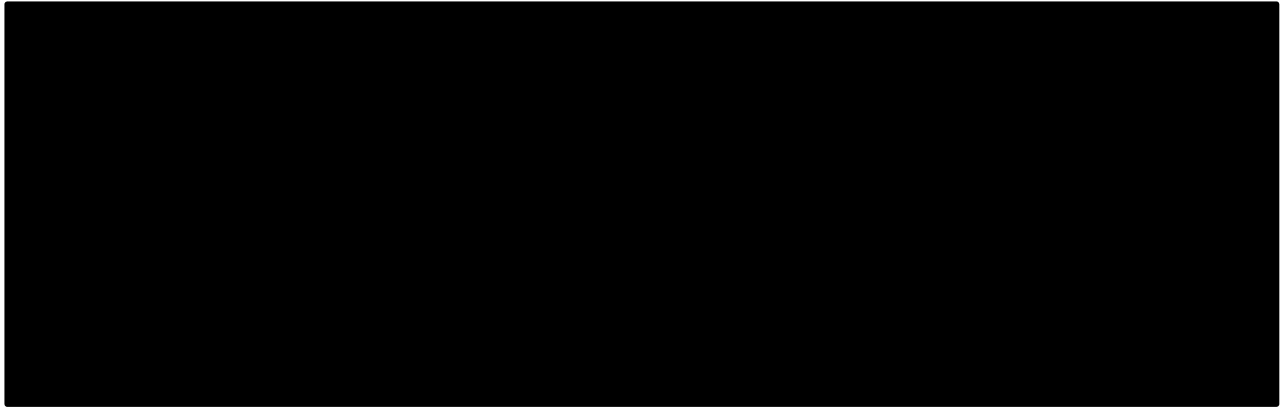
Figure 43: 'Mutt and Jeff', *The Topeka Daily State Journal*, 23 June 1917.

The connection between masculinity, military service and citizenship is a familiar one. Bearing arms for the community has traditionally been associated with male political membership of that community.[28] Minority military participation during conflicts has often been shown to exercise pressure on the nation's systems of racial discrimination (and in the case of World War One, sexist discrimination) as the contribution of returning minority soldiers undermined the structures on which this discrimination is based. Numerous historians have traced the significance of the impact of World War Two on the Civil Rights movement.[29] The same theory

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[28] Kunal M. Parker, 'Review of Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship During the Civil War Era', *The American Journal of Legal History*, 52 (2012), p. 554.
[29] There are a whole host of studies on the significance of military service for the Civil Rights Movement. See for example Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience during World War II* (New York, 2010); Alexander Bielakowski, *African American Troops in World War II* (London, 2012).

has been traced backwards too: Christian Samito has made a powerful argument that participation in the Civil War was part of a process in which both African-Americans and Irish-Americans became citizens, and Adriane Danette Lentz-Smith has connected black military service in World War One to the mobilisation of a generation of African-Americans.[30]

On the other hand, depictions of war can be used as a means of shoring up an exclusively white patriotic mainstream. As Ali Behdad points out, the oppositional models of the patriotic citizen and the menacing alien are central to American nationalist discourse.[31] The connection has also been examined by Gary Gerstle, who noted the role of films and books produced in the 1930s that celebrated 'the decency, honesty, and patriotism of ordinary Americans' in creating a model of civic nationalism.[32] In creating a culture of nationalism, the expected behaviour of the nation's members and demonstrations of their belonging to the polity assume considerable importance, especially at times of heightened concern over threats to the nation. Like Gerstle's 1930s films, the wartime comic strips engaged with acts of patriotism, but did so in a complex way. Often subverting the strictly patriotic and restrictive message of newspaper and editorials, they found humour in the darkest of times, acting as a safety valve for an increasingly wrought American public using humour to diffuse hostility, rather than stoking it up.

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[30] Christian G. Samito, *Becoming American under fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the politics of citizenship during the Civil War era* (Ithaca, 2009); Adriane Danette Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles* (Cambridge, Mass.; London, 2009).

[31] Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation*, pp. 10–11. Behdad's book argues that nativism, far from being an exception to an otherwise liberal political tradition should actually be seen as the driving force behind much of the nation's immigration policy, one that continues to define citizenship and national identity in exclusionary terms and in a normalizing fashion.

[32] Gary Gerstle, American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century (Princeton, 2002), p. 153.

While there were significant divisions of opinion over the possibility of American involvement in World War One, these were, largely, replaced with an almost hysterical public show of support after it actually happened in 1917.[33] The patriotic fervour that swept the country after the outbreak of the war found expression on the comic page, with characters reacting to the war with an astounding enthusiasm that mirrored public opinion.[34] While their participation in the war effort was always displayed in a comedic context, the jokes did not satirise or undermine their patriotic intentions. In fact, the characters in the comics began their involvement in the war before America's entry in 1917. In one, Happy Hooligan decides he must distinguish himself in the war effort if he is to marry Suzanne, but he fails to make it any further than New Jersey.[35] In another early reference, Abie the Agent and some friends hear that an acquaintance that nobody likes has enlisted. Abe comments that he will likely be so unpopular that he will be the first one shot.[36] *Bringing Up Father'*s Jiggs is concerned about the effect that the war will have on beer rations so buys a brewery in 1914.[37] Mutt and Jeff joined the fight against the Germans nearly a full year before America declared war, going off to the trenches 'to fight for the English-speaking race against the Germans' in August 1915.[38] Over the next few months, Bud Fisher sends Mutt and Jeff around the world in various branches of several different armies (including the German one in October). Interestingly, at the point of America's entry into World War One, Mutt and Jeff then decide to switch to fighting in the Mexican War, purportedly after a letter received by Fisher from a child asking Mutt and Jeff to fight the Mexican War and capture

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[33] On the opposition to the war, see Justus D. Doenecke, *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of America's Entry Into World War I* (Lexington, 2011).
[34] William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill, 1992), p. 145.
[35] 'Happy Hooligan', *Omaha Daily Bee,* 19 September 1915.
[36] 'Abie the Agent', W*ashington Times,* 30 June 1914.
[37] 'Bringing Up Father', *Omaha Daily Bee,* 12 August 1914. (12/8/14Omaha)
[38] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Seattle Star,* 25 August 1915; Mutt and Jeff, *Tulsa Daily World,* 22 September 1915.

Francisco "Pancho" Villa so that their father will not have to go to the front.[39] The timing of their efforts, and the very limited extent of their patriotism, is telling.

Fisher's use of World War One was lighthearted and apolitical, his characters' participation in the war enabling him to portray them in a range of topical but far-fetched scenarios in far flung locations, rather than depict the reality of war experience on the front or at home. The swift removal of Mutt and Jeff from the front once America entered the war might suggest Fisher had concerns over actively commentating on a matter of such political significance, or potentially trivialising the war effort. He does not cover the topic again until April 1917, when the pair discusses the possibility of enlisting.[40] This signals the beginning of their new and rather unpatriotic career as expert draft dodgers, during which they go to great lengths to avoid having to fight, from getting married to pulling out their own teeth.

The connection between displays of patriotism and evidence of racialised or nationalistic fervour is complex, but the complete lack of black patriotism on the comic page did reinforce the connection between whiteness and American citizenship, something that did not accurately reflect reality at the time. When America declared war in April 1917, 4,000 black volunteers immediately enlisted in the army, completely filling the ranks of the four designated all-black army units. As the War Department mandated segregated regiments, the decision was made to suspend further black enlistment, despite the disappointing response from white Americans.[41]

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[39] Mutt and Jeff, *Topeka Daily State Journal,* 11 May 1916.
[40] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Topeka Daily State Journal,* 21 April 1917.
[41] Nina Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial: The African American Experience During World War I* (Lanham, Maryland, 2014), p. 52.

Indeed, the dearth of white volunteers meant that within a month of entering the war, Wilson's administration was forced to begin compulsory military service.[42] More than 350,000 black Americans served in segregated units during World War I, yet across the strips in this study the single acknowledgement of their immense contribution to the war effort was the depiction of a black serviceman travelling in the same boat as Wilbur Duff when he went to war in 1918.[43] Black characters, either regular or supplementary, did not participate in or discuss the war in any way. The only non-white character to be involved in a storyline connected to the topic was Neewah, the Japanese valet employed by the Perkins family, who was singled out for his lack of awareness of the meaning of the acronym W.S.S. - We Support Soldiers.[44] While there is no evidence to support a reading of the strips' treatment of patriotism as an effort to define whiteness per se, there is ample reason to regard the exclusion of blacks from the war effort as a definite defence of white privilege and superiority, and as a way of reinforcing the failings of black Americans to behave as required by true citizens.

A comparison of the treatment of wartime participation in the strips featuring middle-class WASPS (*Polly and Her Pals, The Gumps, Doings of the Duffs*), Irish immigrants (*Bringing Up Father*) and Jewish immigrants (*Abie the Agent*) highlights some subtle differences that suggest an increased need for immigrants to demonstrate belonging. For the WASP characters, whose patriotism is assumed, wartime participation is reasonably low-level, with patriotic practises like purchasing liberty bonds or rationing treated in much the same way as other 'fashionable' fads and activities in which the characters engaged. In *The Gumps* (which debuted in early 1918), the

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[42] Ibid.

[43] 'https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohtml/exhibit/aopart7.html [last accessed 20 March 2019].

[44] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 6 April 1918.

war is a minor topic, with only a small handful of strips referencing the international crisis taking place. Andy buys liberty bonds, expresses his approval of national war savings, calculates how lucrative liberty bonds are, donates peach stones for carbon gas and sends a Christmas Box to the front.[45] Later, in 1919, Min invests all their spare cash in victory bonds.[46] Walter Allman's *Doings of the Duffs* presents a similar picture. Tom Duff declares in 1916 that he would like to enlist and go to war so he could show his wife Helen the measure of a real man - but does not follow through.[47] Olivia is sad when her boyfriend goes to the front in January 1918 as she is worried he will have his head turned by all the pretty French girls.[48] The family's experiences of rationing provided punchlines on three occasions during 1918 and they spend so much on liberty bonds that they cannot afford to buy new clothes.[49] Olivia gets a new job as a taxi driver in order to free up male labour for the war effort in June, but the joke is firmly centred around the likelihood of male passengers getting fresh with her rather than focusing on the increased responsibility of women in the wartime workforce.[50] In September the whole family demonstrate their patriotism: Wilbur is called up and departs for training camp, Tom buys more liberty bonds, Helen knits Wilbur a jumper and Olivia makes a service flag.[51] Wilbur's brief army career is only mentioned in two strips: one showing him on the boat to France, the other describing how he shot home as soon as peace was declared.[52] A handful of strips in 1919

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[45] 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger,* various [11 July 1918, 5 October 1918, 9 October 1918, 13 November 1918].
[46] 'The Gumps', Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger, 28 April 1919.
[47] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Mitchell Daily Republican,* 25 April 1916.
[48] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Tacoma Times,* 3 January 1918.
[49] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Tacoma Times,* various [23 March 1918, 22 March 1918, 16 April 1918, 15 May 1918].
[50] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Tacoma Times*, 27 June 1918.
[51] 'Doings of the Duffs', *West Virginian,* 27, 30 September 1918.
[52] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* 3 December 1918.

showed the family had social connections to the army, but no further displays of patriotism are evident.

The New-York based Perkins family of *Polly and Her Pals* displayed slightly more patriotic endeavour during World War One, with Pa Perkins joining the Home Defense League (a New York organisation 'organized to do the work of the police in preserving law and order when the regular force is called to sterner duty') in June 1917.[53] He struggles with the physical demands of the role, however, asking Neewah to bring him cold cream, foot ease powder, and a parasol borrowed from Polly as he is patrolling on the sunny side of the street.[54] His short career with the League comes to a close when he is injured buying socks for the HDL Captain at a bargain sale and has to be returned home on a stretcher.[55] War sacrifice is central to the humour of October 1917, with each family member pledging to give up something they neither need nor want, in order to help the war effort.[56] They invest in several war savings cards in April 1918, and Delicia goes to work at the local munitions factory, with the fumes she brings home putting the whole family in constant danger.[57] In May, Polly follows suit and gets a job as a military chauffeur, before all the female members of the family decide to become farmerettes (the colloquial term for the women who joined the Woman's Land Army of America, founded so that women could take over agricultural work as men were drafted into the army) and then 'war cops'. From August, the characters' attempts to ration are used for comic relief, with several strips detailing their attempts to make clothes out of wax paper to help the war effort - a brilliant strategy until

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[53] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 7 June 1917.
[54] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 12 July 1917.
[55] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 14 July 1917.
[56] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times*, 22 October 1917 - 25 October 1917.
[57] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times* (2 April 1918, 8 April 1918).

Ashur decides to make wax paper bathing suits.[58] Ashur enlists and Pa becomes a four-minute

man, making rousing pro-war speeches. When the war ended in November, Sterrett published

one strip discussing the increased opportunities now available to women.[59]

By far the most eager to demonstrate his patriotism was the Jewish Abe Kabibble, who joined

the army in around October 1917. Hershfield's character, who he openly acknowledged was

deliberately created as a sympathetic Jewish character, was a 'clean-cut-well-dressed specimen

of Jewish humor' that would counter the uncomplimentary Jewish stereotypes of vaudeville and

Burlesque.[60] Richard Moss's study of *Abie the Agent* has emphasised the strip's efforts to depict

newly arrived immigrants, in particular Jews, as patriotic in a time when nativism was at its

height.[61] Unlike the characters in many of the other strips, Abie is not content to simply buy

liberty bonds, volunteer in wartime organisations or embrace rationing. In fact, over the period of

1917 to 1918, Hershfield casts Abie firmly as the epitome of American patriotism, his prolific

efforts recognised by Secretary of War Baker, who thanked Hershfield for Abie's war activity.[62]

Despite his small stature and stereotypically Jewish bow-legged physique, Abe enlists in the

army and goes off to the trenches in October 1917.[63]

Hershfield requires his readers to suspend disbelief to an extent, as throughout 1917 and 1918 he

is variably seen fighting at the front on one day, and then back in his New York life the next. At

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[58] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 23 August 1917.
[59] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 19 November 1918.
[60] Appel, 'Jews in American Caricature: 1820-1914', p. 104.
[61] Moss, 'Racial Anxiety on the Comics Page', p. 2.
[62] 'An Exclusive Interview for The Jewish Monitor From Harry Hershfield, Creator of 'Abie The Agent'', *The Jewish Monitor* (June 1921).
[63] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 5 October 1917.

times it seems that Abe is in fact at an army training camp near to New York (he receives visitors

and has days off where he returns to the city), but on occasion the setting changes and he appears

to be on a French beach. This strategy was common among comic artists in this period, who used

time and space flexibly when creating long serialised storylines. When not at the front (or camp)

Abe was equally as voracious in encouraging others to join the war effort. He helps raise funds

for the Jewish war relief fund, flies service flags, buys army uniform for others and closes the

auto company to take a group of soldiers out for a meal.[64] On his days off, he either remains in

camp or goes out recruiting other men to the army. Unusually, Hershfield also allows Abe to

actively vocalise political messages about the responsibility of immigrants to contribute to the

war effort. In one strip, released in December 1917, Abe lectures the no-good Mendel Minsk on

his duties as an American citizen. He tells Minsk that it is the time for everyone to fight for their

country and for liberty, and he is proud to do it. When Minsk retorts "You won't get me walking

for miles through the mud with a sixty pound pack on my back", Abe reminds Minsk that "You

carried more than that around on your beck [back] when you first came to this country - and they

let you make a good living too - don't forget".[65]

Abe's patriotism during the war is always foregrounded within the wider context of his enduring

Jewishness, with his fulfilment of Jewish stereotypes providing a contrast to his patriotism in

order to elicit humour in war-related sketches. For instance, when an employee is drafted in

October 1917, Abe buys him a gold watch as a farewell present - but makes sure it is a cheap

one: if he is captured, he doesn't want the Germans getting hold of something valuable.[66] His

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[64] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* (29 November, 7 December, 29 December, 1917).
[65] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 14 December 1917.
[66] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 28 September 1917.

identity as an urban Jewish businessman is retained as a core identifier alongside Abe the patriot;

when he realises customers at his movie theater are watching his shows over and over again

without buying another ticket, he puts up a sign: 'If you have already seen the full show,

remember there's another fellow outside waiting to pay his war tax and help win the war! BE A

PATRIOT!'[67] In another strip, Abe takes over the clothing concern of the Ginsberg and

Levenberg Company. Much to the dismay of his bosses, he immediately disappears to the office

of the Draft Board. As they wonder why he did not tell them that he was intending to enlist, Abe

is actually requesting a list of those to be drafted, so that he won't waste money sending them

advertising material for one of the company's new fall suits.[68] His lack of physical masculinity is

also regularly emphasised: he takes an umbrella out on sentry duty, bemoans the lack of blankets

in his tent and, during his time in the cavalry, and only manages to stay astride a wild horse

because his belt buckle is caught on the saddle.[69]

This strategy by Hershfield, of depicting Abe as at once intensely patriotic (and by extension,

deserving of his citizenship and identity as an American) and also fundamentally Jewish,

provides some insight into his perception of the psychology of his readers. As Desmond King

has argued, the single most important issue about immigration in twentieth century America has

been the assimilability of immigrants. Opponents of immigration have consistently focused on

immigrant unsuitability for membership of the American polity.[70] Hershfield deliberately

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[67] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 17 April 1918.
[68] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 27 September 1918.
[69] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times* (22 October 1917, 23 November 1917, 4 March 1918).
[70] Desmond S. King, Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy (Cambridge, Mass. London, 2002), p. 15.

showed Abie fulfilling the most important requirement of American citizenship - patriotism -

while also retaining the humorous identifiers required for successful ethnic humour.

In the context of World War One, feelings about the concept of the hyphenated-American, and

the associated fear that the emotional and political allegiances of the new arrivals from Eastern

and Southern Europe may lay overseas, intensified. With a war in Europe perceived to strain the

loyalties of even settled immigrants, the public mood seemed to match that expressed by

President Theodore Roosevelt in 1915, when he declared: 'There is no such thing as a

hyphenated American who is a good American. The only man who is a good American is the

man who is American and nothing else.'[71] Historians have, as Aviva Taubenfeld and Rebecca

Kobrin have argued, tended to focus on the extent to which immigrants heeded the demands for

100 percent Americanism, and, eager to make America their home and display their worthiness

of a place there, willingly discarded their affiliation to their homeland.[72] However, the reality

was more complicated. This is illustrated by Aviva Taubenfeld's careful analysis of the

relationship between Theodore Roosevelt - who publicly insisted that hyphenated identities

would not be tolerated, and American citizens could be loyal to only one nation – and author and

social commentator Jacob Riis, who openly identified as a Danish-American who was blessed to

have two flags to love. Despite Riis' dual loyalties, he and Roosevelt maintained a strong

friendship and mutual admiration, with Roosevelt describing Riis as the man who 'came nearest

to being the ideal American citizen'.[73] Taubenfield's conclusion that in reality, the discourse on

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[71] Aviva F. Taubenfeld, Rough Writing: Ethnic Authorship in Theodore Roosevelt's America (New York, 2008), p. 42
[72] Ibid, p. 42.
[73] Jacob August Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York, 1901).

American identity in this period was a constant process of negotiation, and not a static concept, is

compelling, and is borne out by Hershfield's treatment of Abie as a positive version of the

hyphenated American during World War One. Abe's Jewishness is inherent, both culturally and

biologically, but is not national. This is possible partly because of the diverse origins of Jewish-

Americans in this period: while historians have often categorised Abe as an Americanized

second-generation German Jew, there is actually no evidence from the strip or Hershfield's

writings that this was the case. Hershfield was himself a second-generation immigrant whose

parents had immigrated to Cedar Rapids in Iowa from Russia.[74]

By contrast, despite their 'ethnic' identity as reasonably recently arrived Irish immigrants (Jiggs

states in one strip that he came over on the same boat as Charlie Chaplin, who moved

permanently to the States around 1913) Maggie and Jiggs' levels of patriotism during World War

One were decidedly unremarkable. There is no implication that they were unpatriotic or any

suggestion that their Irish creator, George McManus, felt the need to emphasise their desire to

support the war effort and prove their Americanization. Indeed, much like the strips featuring

WASP characters, the references to the war are fairly low-key. Jiggs attempts to enlist in April

1918 but is unable to do so as he is too old to fight.[75] In 1919 it transpires that their (nameless)

son has been away in the army and was decorated for bravery, but when he returns home, he is

not brave enough to stand up to Maggie.[76] An old friend, Monahan, is also noted as being an

army Captain.[77] Much like in the other strips, the couple's main contribution to the war effort is

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[74] Ted Merwin, *In Their Own Image: New York Jews in Jazz Age Popular Culture* (New Brunswick, 2006), p. 74.
[75] 'Bringing Up Father', *El Paso Herald,* 4 April 1918.
[76] 'Bringing Up Father', *El Paso Herald*, 17 January 1919.
[77] 'Bringing Up Father', *El Paso Herald*, 20 September 1918.

through the purchasing of liberty bonds, an activity which according to Orm Overland took on

'the symbolic meaning of a demonstration of true Americanization for all immigrants'.[78]

However, the strips do not cast the behaviour as an act of patriotism - rather 'liberty bond' is

substituted for 'cash' in the adaptation of an existing and well-used comedic set-up in which

Jiggs returns home late from a poker game, but placates Maggie by handing over his winnings.
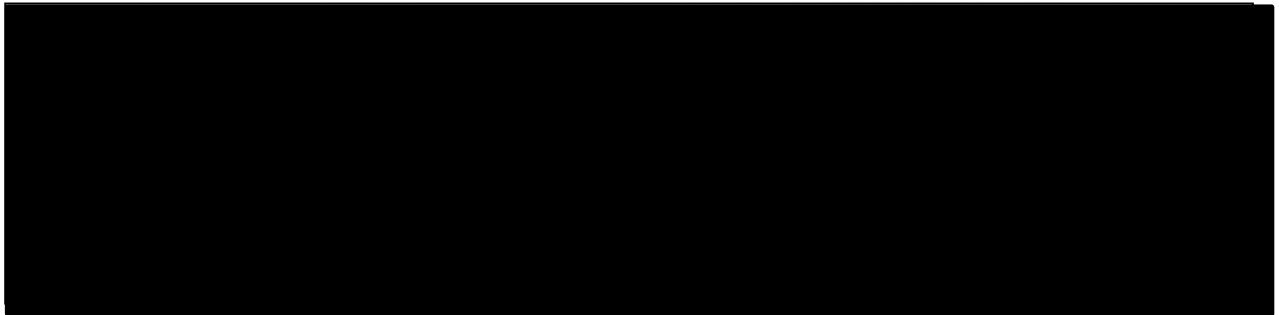
Figure 44: 'Bringing Up Father', *Topeka Daily State Journal,* 24 April 1918.

Nativism was heightened during World War One, which combined with fears over the growth of

socialism in the early 1900s to culminate in the first 'Red Scare' of 1917-1920.[79] Passed on June

15th 1917, the Espionage Act allowed imprisonment of up to 20 years and/or a fine of up to

$10,000 for persons who wilfully made false reports to help the enemy, incited rebellion among

the armed forces, or attempted to obstruct recruiting or the operation of the draft.[80] The Act

'provided the opening wedge for the suppression of those who were considered to be disloyal to

the American and Allied war cause.'[81] The Sabotage Act followed in April 1918, extending the

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[78] Orm Øverland, Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870-1930 (Urbana, 2000), p. 113.
[79] See for example Michaels, *Our America*; Schrag, *Not Fit for Our Society*; Higham, *Strangers in the Land*; Schrag, *Not Fit for Our Society*; Emery, Emery, and Roberts, *The Press and America*.
[80] Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism*, p. 160.
[81] Emery, Emery, and Roberts, *The Press and America*, p. 256.

authority of the government far beyond the scope of the First Amendment, giving it full power over speech and printed opinion, regardless of consequences. It forbade disloyal, profane, scurrilous or abusive remarks about the form of government, flag, or uniform of the US or any language intended to obstruct the war effort in any way.[82]

Amidst this panic, seemingly inconsequential terms and activities became loaded with political meaning and were heavily scrutinised and regulated. In New York, flying red flags was banned.[83] The American Defense Society encouraged the public burning of German-language books and campaigned to change the names of cities, streets, parks, and schools in America to the names of Belgian and French communities destroyed in the war. In Nebraska, Germantown was renamed Garland after a local soldier who died in the war, and Berlin, Iowa, became Lincoln. In June 1918, a Michigan congressman introduced a bill that would have required such name changes nationwide.[84] With seemingly unending fervour, anything and everything with a German sounding name was adapted; German measles became liberty measles, sauerkraut was transformed into liberty cabbage and hamburgers were re-named liberty steak. The comic industry was not untouched by this trend, with one of the country's flagship comic strips, the Germanic *Hans und Fritz* (Dirks' alternative version of the *Katzenjammer Kids*) renamed *The Captain and the Kids* in the summer of 1918. Arthur Link wryly observed that in their virulent anti-German efforts of the period, Americans 'lost not only their tolerance but their sense of humour as well.'[85]

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[82] Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism*, p. 160.
[83] Emery, Emery, and Roberts, *The Press and America*, p. 260.
[84] Michael C. LeMay, *Transforming America: Perspectives on U.S. Immigration [3 volumes]: Perspectives on U.S. Immigration* (Oxford, 2012), p. 38.
[85] Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism*, p. 159.

Unlike the stories in the newspapers in which they appeared, the comics satirised, rather than encouraged, this super-patriotism. Several characters are pictured engaging in anti-German activity, which is made to look ridiculous rather than patriotic. Jiggs smashes up a set of Maggie's prized plates, for the simple reason that they were made in Germany.[86] In *Doings of the Duffs,* Wilbur destroys a doll belonging to a toddler for the same reason, and Tom throws a pair of shoes at a cobbler because he wrapped them in German newspaper.[87] *Polly and Her Pals'* Sam Perkins Pa gets a German sausage dog, but sneaks him home in a golf bag because he does not want anyone to see him until after the war.[88] Delicia is embarrassed when she is struck down with German measles, and wishes she could have caught the Spanish flu like everybody else in the family.[89] While the comics did not exactly criticise the actions of its characters, the scenes are humorous rather than serious. The particular treatment of this topic by the comic artists in this period suggests a relative degree of freedom afforded them to make light of serious social topics, even in a climate in which freedom of speech was limited and social anxiety over the issue in question extremely high. Furthermore, the excessive alarm over the idea of dangerous foreign elements was brought to the fore by Harry Hershfield in a 1918 strip in which a terrified Abie declares that his taxi driver's reckless driving must surely demonstrate that he is an enemy alien. When his companion points out that if they die, the driver would die too, Abe retorts that any enemy alien would be glad to give up their own life in order to kill TWO Americans![90]

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86 'Bringing Up Father', *El Paso Herald*, 1 October 1918.
87 'Doings of the Duffs', Fort Wayne Sentinel, 8 December 1917; Tacoma Times, 20 April 1918.
88 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times*, 27 April 1918.
89 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 18 October 1918.
90 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 15 March 1918.

The placement of such a joke in a strip by and about a Jewish man is telling. After the Russian

Revolution of 1917, there was considerable suspicion in America that Bolshevism was supported

by the world's Jews. Fear over wartime enemies merged with concern over the threat of

communism and contributed to a public climate of fear and distrust. Publications like Henry

Ford's vehemently anti-Semitic *Dearborn Independent* stoked up public fears, claiming that

Bolshevism was 'purely Jewish'.[91] In December 1920, the *Albuquerque Journal* reported on a

conference that had taken place in order to tackle the largescale propaganda campaign making

the charge that 'bolshevism is part of a conspiracy of Jews and Freemasons to secure world

domination'.[92] Hershfield's decision to include a joke in which Abe - a Jewish man - fulfils the

role of the panic-struck citizen excessively affected by the Red Scare and suspicious of outsiders

could be interpreted as either an effort to undermine the anti-Semitic undertones of the Red

Scare. But it is equally straightforward, and equally persuasive, to argue that as much as the gag

is intended to satirise the nativist panic, it also serves to differentiate Abe, as an acculturated

American Jew, from the potential threat posed by the new immigrants. As always, the humour is

multi-layered and subjective, and would have appealed to a variety of readers with differing

viewpoints.

Literacy, racial superiority and citizenship

The perceived threat of immigrants in these years was defined in broader terms than their

political affiliation. Indeed, from the late nineteenth century, much anti-immigrant rhetoric

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[91] 'Perpetuating Baruch's Handiwork', *Dearborn Independent,* 25 December 1920.
[92] 'American Jewish Committee Brands As False Rumors of Hebraic World-Conspiracy', *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, 2 December 1920.

focused on the physical threat they posed to the health of the nation, with racial biology displacing racist ideology, 'perpetuating the binary opposition of native and immigrant by normalizing it as an objective fact.'[93] Anti-immigrant rhetoric conflated physical inferiority with intellectual deficiency, and sought ways to restrict the number of mentally and physically 'diseased' immigrants. After a long campaign by interest groups like the Immigration Restriction League, who had encountered a setback in 1915 when President Woodrow Wilson vetoed a similar bill, the 1917 Immigration Act instituted a literacy test, to be conducted by consular staff or steamship companies prior to embarkation.[94]

The literacy test required immigrants to read five lines from the Constitution in any language and had a decidedly racial slant. Supporters of the test explicitly connected its usefulness to the ability to weed out the 'servile immigrant men and fecund immigrant women whose sons would inherit their smaller physique, lower intelligence, and questionable moral sense,' and ensure that the immigrants allowed to enter the country were the 'best specimens to breed from'.[95] Both proponents and opponents of the test framed their arguments in race, gender and sexuality rather than education. The implication was that the test could be used to identify genetic, and potentially hereditary, traits rather than measure the intellectual capability of individuals. As Rogers Smith has argued, Henry Cabot Lodge openly acknowledged that the true aim of his literacy test was to weed out "inferior" races, stating that committee research showed that the test would most affect the races "most alien to the great body of the people of the United States",

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[93] Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation*, pp. 131–141.
[94] Steven G. Koven and Frank Götzke, *American Immigration Policy: Confronting the Nation's Challenges* (Louisville, 2010), p. 130.
[95] Jeanne D. Petit, *The Men and Women We Want: Gender, Race, and the Progressive Era Literacy Test Debate* (New York, 2010), p. 2.

including "the Italians, Russians, Poles, Hungarians, Greeks and Asiatics". The idea was that English-speakers, Germans, Scandinavians and the French would be affected "very lightly or not at all".[96] While the test did not require immigrants to be able to speak or read English, this connection was made by numerous reformers seeking to Americanise new arrivals, and by those who sought to criticise immigrants' failures to assimilate properly to American culture. As such, the topic of literacy more widely became coded in American culture, the ability to read and write representing broader suitability for citizenship.

Interestingly, literacy is only used as a humour construct in two comics over the entire period: *Abie the Agent* and *Bringing Up Father,* the only two written by and about ethnic characters. In *Abie,* the literacy test is referred to explicitly by Abe (an acculturated and educated Jewish immigrant) to highlight the shortcomings of others. In 1922, Abe jokes that Mendel Minsk - a distant relative who is a 'no good grifter' and personifies many of the more negative Jewish stereotypes prevalent in the era - is too afraid to go to Europe on holiday, as he fears that the law might be passed in his absence, and he will no longer be allowed back in.[97] On one occasion in 1925, he notices an organ-grinder playing in the street, and remarks that the country really ought to implement a literacy test, as the fellow is playing outside a building with a sign saying "for rent" on the outside.[98] In both instances, the humour in the joke is subtle, neither strongly reinforcing nor challenging the nativist associations of the test.

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[96] Smith, *Civic Ideals*, p. 364.
[97] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 9 January 1922.
[98] 'Abie the Agent', *Portsmouth Daily Times,* 6 May 1925.

George McManus, himself a second-generation Irish immigrant, uses literacy more playfully in *Bringing Up Father,* as a means of engaging with the position of the Irish Jiggs and Maggie in the racial hierarchies of American society. He builds on longstanding caricatures of Irish ignorance on several occasions. The couple are not always illiterate (and on numerous occasions can be seen reading novels and the newspaper), but the inability to read and write is used on several occasions to highlight both of their intellectual shortcomings. The strip below (figure 45) which appeared in 1913, illustrates a classic scene. Jiggs and Maggie are checking into a fancy hotel. Maggie asks Jiggs to sign them in, but Jiggs cannot do so because he does not know how to write his name. Maggie advises Jiggs to simply spell it out to the hotel clerk, but when Jiggs asks her to tell him how their name is spelled, her own illiteracy is uncovered, and she feigns a hearing problem, and seeks their daughter to help them. In the strip, a black hotel porter stands wordlessly in the background, providing a racial contrast to Jiggs and Maggie, his service position clearly identifying him as their social inferior.

As Desmond King has noted, after the Immigration Act of 1917 (which included a literacy clause) was passed, state and city governments were persuaded to inaugurate hundreds of events to facilitate the Americanization of immigrants. Literacy and acquisition of the English language were consistently promoted. The failure to sign their names or speak English was quickly identified as a threat to American productivity and military preparedness.[99] A superficial analysis of this strip might conclude that it undermined Jiggs' qualifications for citizenship, casting into question the ability of Irish immigrants - even long-settled, rich ones who mix with society's

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[99] King, *Making Americans*, p. 97.

elites - to fulfil the basic requirements of immigrants seeking refuge in America. The presence of the black porter in the frame might even lead some historians to question whether Jiggs and Maggie's racial position is being challenged, given that this is a moment in history when Southern blacks faced literacy tests. Indeed, in another literacy-based strip published three years before, Jiggs' illiteracy is directly comparable to that of a black errand-boy he hires to deliver flowers to a friend who is sick: when neither of them is able to spell the word 'chrysanthemum', Jiggs decides it might be better to send roses instead.[100]

Figure 45: 'Bringing Up Father', *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 7 August 1913.

However, the fact that Jiggs was created by a man who was himself a second-generation Irish immigrant must be considered when reading meaning into the strips. As Elsa Nystrom points out, self-directed ethnic humour has often been used by minorities to disarm a hostile audience. She contends that 'this type of joke sent a message that the minority group knew its weaknesses, understood them, and was even proud of them.'[101] The idea that a man like McManus would see

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[100] 'Bringing Up Father', *Richmond Times Dispatch,* 17 November 1915.
[101] Nystrom, 'A Rejection of Order', pp. 40–41.

literacy issues as an Irish 'weakness' is problematic. The fact that an Irish cultural creator and well-known personality was willing to engage with such stereotypes when creating a character that he openly associated with actually does more to undermine that stereotype than reinforce it, suggesting a larger awareness of, but lack of concern over, any suggestion of illiteracy as an Irish trait. In this regard, McManus' positioning of Jiggs in a stereotypical Irish mould playfully subverts anti-Irish thinking, making the idea itself ridiculous, rather than indicating any defensiveness or racial sensitivity in McManus. It might also have been seen to be subtly pointing to the hypocrisy of second- and third-generation Irish – whose whiteness was well-established by the early 1900s – trying to exclude other immigrant groups on the basis of ignorance. Overall, the three topics (immigration, wartime patriotism and literacy) demonstrate a complex balancing act.

The nativist fervour of the period rarely found explicit form on the comics page. However, the absence of immigrant characters from mainstream strips and the (albeit often subversive) treatment of white ethnics' civic status in the strips in which they appeared demonstrated the complex and far-reaching impact of racial thinking in the period. While the Progressive preference may have been for the assimilation of immigrants into the mainstream, the message from the comic page suggests an enduring belief in the fundamental separateness of immigrants from their WASP counterparts, without that separation being defined in particularly hierarchical terms.

Blackness

A caveat. In rememberance of things past, there is an occasional blocking out of the ugly. Unlike my beloved familiars, like the Kaztzenjammers and others, there were jokes that were not funny. In fact, some were racist, with outrageous stereotypes and caricatures, especially of African-Americans. Fortunately these are no longer acceptable, and in the words of the Inspector: "Dot iss Kaput".

~ Studs Terkel, 'Mayhem mit Hans und Fritz', *Circulation Magazine*, June/July 1998.

As Terkel recognized in a 1998 article looking back on the era of the funny papers, the comics engaged with race in numerous ways across the 35-year period of this study. Across the board, the comics' treatment of race served to reinforce the widespread acceptance of a fiction of racial difference and inherent white superiority. This fiction, as Crenshaw and others have argued, has been transformed into concrete racial inequities, which persist to the present day.[102] As such, they should all be viewed as evidence of a widespread and collective racism that was entrenched in American society and perpetuated by the syndicated comics industry. The strips' treatment of race validated the racialized social system that existed both in the North and the Jim Crow South. The quote from Studs Terkel, above, is telling. It suggests that the 'familiars', strips like those in this sample, rose above the 'outrageous' racism of some of the minority comics. It seems likely that most comic artists, editors and syndicate bosses would have agreed that their treatment of race avoided the 'vicious' caricatures banned by Pulitzer in his papers.[103] However, in reality,

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[102] 'President Trump Has Attacked Critical Race Theory. Here's What to Know About the Intellectual Movement', *Time magazine,* 29th September 2020. Online at https://time.com/5891138/critical-race-theory-explained/ [last accessed 21/10/2020].
[103] Soper, 'From Swarthy Ape to Sympathetic Everyman and Subversive Trickster', p. 270.

comic artists relied on established racial paradigms to express and defend white dominance and marginalise African Americans.

While recognising that all the ways that the comics marginalised African Americans were harmful, it is nevertheless possible and useful to break down the different ways in which the strips used the idea of race and treated black (and very occasionally white ethnic) characters. I use the following three broad categories, which are examined in turn: 1. Overtly racist or offensive jokes, which would have been recognised as such in the context of the period. This consisted of both instances where individuals were attacked verbally or harmed physically based on race, or clear articulation of the notion of white superiority and black inferiority to construct humour; 2. Structural/conceptual racism, in which racial difference is used as a means of creating humour and emphasising difference, but without openly suggesting anything negative about the black character; 3. Racial stereotyping, in which black or immigrant characters are portrayed in a limited or negative fashion, which even if it was not explicitly linked to their skin colour, served to perpetuate a negative image of black people, and reinforce existing racial stereotypes. The combined impact of this treatment was to perpetuate and reinforce a social structure based around normative whiteness, easing white anxieties over the increasing presence of immigrants and African Americans in their towns and cities by reassuring them of their colour privilege through comparison to an inferior black other. The roots of the black caricatures used in the comics lay in the plantation rhetoric used to justify slavery in the previous century, with black characters evolving only minimally from the racial tropes established by decades of minstrelsy culture, their development determined not by any attempt to create rounded black characters, but

rather by the need to adapt existing plantation stereotypes to the emerging national culture of the twentieth century.

Overt and deliberate racism

Over the 35-year period in this study, only a tiny proportion of the 26,000 strips examined contained material that – in the context of the period – was openly and unapologetically racist in the same vein as *Birth of a Nation*. This category includes jokes that made explicitly negative references to people based on race, those that relied on imagery linked to slavery and those that depicted the crossing of racial boundaries in a way clearly intended to provoke the reader into a disapproving reaction. In these set-ups, the punchline of the gag only works if the reader embraces the viewpoint that black (or once 'Oriental') equals inferior. These examples openly assert white superiority and draw humour from the exercising of that superiority over black characters. Only ten strips – less than one tenth of one percent of the sample – fit this description. The table below details the year of publication and which comic these jokes appeared in, and highlights the almost complete disappearance of (by the period's standards) racially offensive humour after the end of World War One. The one joke to appear after 1920 depicting a lynching scene had a white subject. Its racist undertones would no doubt have been viewed as deeply offensive by African Americans, but did not actually make any overt connection to race or feature a black character.

Figure 46: Table demonstrating distribution of racist/racial humour across all strips

Year	Comic	Description

1910	Mutt and Jeff	Jeff plays a trick on Mutt, instructing a black night porter at the hotel they are staying in to get into bed with him. When Mutt wakes up, he throws the alarm clock at the porter in horror.[104]
1911	Happy Hooligan	The topper to the main strip depicts a row of black characters sitting on a load of boxes. They are telling an aggressive sexist joke in exaggerated dialect: 'What is the difference between an umbrella and a woman? You can shut an umbrella up without breaking its ribs.'[105]
1912	Mutt and Jeff	Mutt checks into a hotel - there are no single rooms left so he is told he can share with a black man, who is asleep. He decides that he cannot sleep on the street, so he will share with the 'Spade'. Jeff goes up and paints Mutt black and when he wakes up from his wake up call he assumes 'they made a mistake and called the coon'.[106]
1915	Bringing Up Father	Jiggs is at Coney Island where there is a game to throw a ball - 3 shots for five cents - at a black man. If you hit him you get a cigar. Jiggs takes a dollar's worth but asks for his money back when he realises the balls are not iron (and presumably will not do enough damage).[107]
1916	Mutt and Jeff	Mutt and Jeff owe rent money and decide the best option is for Jeff to seduce the landlady so she let them off paying it. They duly go up but find that she is a black woman so Jeff throws the cash at her in disgust and walks out, affirming his superior position as a white man, despite his economic dependence on her.[108]
1916	Mutt and Jeff	Mutt's next rent-avoidance scheme is for Jeff to pretend to be a Southern Colonel and frighten the black landlady. It backfires: she beats Jeff up and he says it's because she's not from the South, she's from the West Indies. Mutt then muses about what his grandfather has told him about how they used to handle the 'southern darkies'.[109]
1918	Abie the Agent	Abe is on a trip and he changes several bills in order to get low enough to have small change ready to throw in the water for 'pickannines' to dive for.[110]
1918	Polly and Her Pals	Neewah (the Japanese valet) is saved by a dog he was meant to drown, so keeps him. The strip's strapline is 'Neewah may be oriental, but he's full of gratitude'.[111]
1920	Polly and Her Pals	Discussing how hard it is to find a good maid, the family considers the option of using apes instead but decide that apes would only be good maids if they were imported from Africa.[112]
1933	Mutt and Jeff	While the strip does not include any black characters, it depicts Mutt being hung from a tree, with the strapline 'The Great Lynching Scene from "The Gulch"'.[113]

[104] 'Mutt and Jeff', *El Paso Herald,* 30th September 1910.
[105] Topper to 'Happy Hooligan', *El Paso Herald,* 11 March 1911.
[106] 'Mutt and Jeff', *El Paso Herald,* 16 March 1912.
[107] 'Bringing Up Father', *Harrisburg Telegraph,* 17 June 1915.
[108] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Topeka Daily State Journal,* 6 September 1916.
[109] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Topeka Daily State Journal,* 8 September 1916.
[110] 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 6 October 1918.
[111] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 16 January 1918.
[112] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 19 February 1920.
[113] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Syracuse Herald,* 26 May 1933.

There are no particularly striking trends evident in these strips. The 1916 *Mutt and Jeff* storyline about the black landlady did engage with themes of regionalism and antebellum race culture that had been reignited in the popular eye with the release of *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. However, none of the other hot points in terms of race relations in this period (such as the 1919 race riots) seem to have really impacted on the strips, whether directly or indirectly. Overall the racist jokes are fairly evenly distributed across the comics in production in the years they appeared. They often focused on contrasting the white character in the strip (which included the Irish Jiggs and Jewish Abe Kabibble) with a black individual, emphasizing the social superiority of the white character with physical – and even violent – comedy, as in the 1915 *Bringing Up Father* strip in which Jiggs pays to throw balls at a black man, but wants his money back when he realizes they are not made of a heavy metal. In a couple of examples, the strict racial boundaries of the period are inadvertently crossed, creating an uneasy tension that would likely have elicited some shock amongst readers. *Mutt and Jeff* creator Bud Fisher had his characters challenge these boundaries on more than one occasion, with the two strips in which Mutt shares a bed with a black man demonstrating a clear transgression of social norms, both in terms of sexuality and race. At the time that these strips were released (1910 and 1912, respectively) however, the syndication of content across the country was in its infancy, with *Mutt and Jeff* appearing in only a handful of Southern states (see chapter 1).

By 1920, when all of the strips in the study were appearing in newspapers nationwide, overtly racist jokes and jokes that excessively transgressed established racial boundaries had largely disappeared from the strips. Perhaps social awareness of the contribution of black soldiers to the war effort, and alarm at the wave of racial violence in the aftermath of the armistice helped to

trigger this shift. However, the continued use of racial humour and lack of any seriously developed black characters indicates the process by which the comics embraced the underlying ethos that shored up Jim Crow, while at the same time, removing the final traces of explicit racism represented by the jokes in the table above. This 'unconscious' racism and use of racial caricatures was a constant throughout the period. This process fitted into the longer-term trend of excluding black characters completely from the comic page as a means of avoiding offending black interest groups without causing offence to whites, something which would come to fruition during World War Two.

Structural/conceptual racism

While jokes that explicitly and deliberately attacked black characters were extremely rare in the comics even in the earlier period, strips using what will here be termed structural or conceptual racist set ups were extremely common. A typical example is as follows: a black character has had a fight, and got a black eye, but is not worried because nobody can see it. There were numerous variants on this type of joke, which sought amusement from the darker colour of black skin without actually implying anything negative about the black character. Given the prevalence of overt racism in intellectual discourse and popular culture at the time (*Birth of a Nation* is the obvious example, but is one of many) this type of racial humour should be viewed slightly differently. It is unlikely that the creators of the comics intended harm when using them or would have considered them racially incendiary. However, these gags were still harmful and destructive. By relying on notions of racial difference, they perpetuated the separation of Americans based on skin colour, and normalised that separation. Charles Lawrence, in a

revisiting of his seminal article *The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection,* explains the importance

of exploring how white supremacy is maintained not only through the intentional deployment of

coercive power, but also through the often unconscious creation, interpretation, and assimilation

of racial text.[114] The comics' use of the concept of racial difference as a humour device

constitutes racial text, the effect of which was to cast blackness as difference or abnormality and

whiteness as natural and the normative standard.

Jokes of this ilk appeared across the entire sample of comics studied. Abe Kabibble is intrigued

to see a black man driving a taxi in 1923, commenting that it is 'the first time I seen one like him

driving one, but why shouldn't he make a living like everyone else?' [115] The humour in the strip

is derived from the fact that, because it is night time, the driver's arm cannot be seen when he

indicates (before the incorporation of indicators into vehicles the driver would indicate by

sticking an arm out of the window) so Abe has to do it himself. A similar setup is used across

several of the other strips: in *Gasoline Alley* several of the black characters end up with black

eyes at one time or another, the gag being the fact that it does not really matter, as nobody can

actually see it.[116] In 1927, during a phase of jokes appearing in *Doings of the Duffs* about

camouflage, a black man is so successfully camouflaged in darkness that he can no longer be

seen.[117] Jiggs notes that the new (black) servant hired in *Bringing Up* Father will be difficult to

see at night.[118] Cocoa, the black valet in *Polly and Her Pals,* is described as being 'as white as a

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[114] Charles R. Lawrence III, 'Unconscious Racism Revisited: Reflections on the Impact and Origins of "The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection"', *Connecticut Law Review,* Vol. 40, no. 4 (May 2008) p. 939.
[115] 'Abie the Agent', *Madison Capital Times,* 25 July 1923.
[116] 'Gasoline Alley', Philadelphia Public Ledger, 21 January 1922, Bakersfield Californian, 16 July 1930.
[117] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Warren Evening Times*, 12 November 1917.
[118] 'Bringing Up Father', *El Paso Herald*, 1 February 1917.

sheet'.[119] And, in a similar construct that created humour by playing with the abstract idea of race, a doctor diagnosed a Chinese man with yellow jaundice in a 1929 *Mutt and Jeff* strip.[120]

Jokes relying on the implicit and fundamental difference between white and black characters (again, without specifically attaching a value judgement to this difference) were also common. A single example that typified many instances of similar gags appeared in a 1929 *Mutt and Jeff* strip, pictured below. Mutt is trying to avoid paying income tax by declaring that he is responsible for eight dependents and thus entitled to an exemption. He gives Jeff the task of rounding up children to bring before the Internal Revenue that afternoon. Jeff dutifully returns, but his selection includes adults, some of which are clearly black and Oriental. Mutt is thrown in jail, cursing the useless Jeff. The reader is expected to laugh at Mutt, for relying on the always-unreliable Jeff to get him out of paying his income tax, and thus getting his comeuppance for trying to avoid income tax. Jeff is probably the prime target of the joke, for his complete obliviousness to the unsuitability of the group he brought back. The (presumably) Chinese and black characters are not the targets of the gag, although their presence may also be a subtle comment on the position of immigrants with regards to the public burden. Just like the jokes about invisible black eyes and yellow jaundice, seemingly innocuous setups like this served to emphasise the idea that there were fundamental differences between racial groups, both reflecting and reinforcing social interest in racial typing. It is difficult to make a case to suggest that the humour in these strips was intended to be subversive, or to challenge prevailing social

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[119] 'Polly and Her Pals', *East Liverpool Review Tribune*, 8 September 1933.
[120] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Sandusky Register,* 2 May 1929.

values. Rather, they were symptomatic of the widespread acceptance among white Americans of social rules that reinforced the idea of racial difference and, as a result, white privilege.
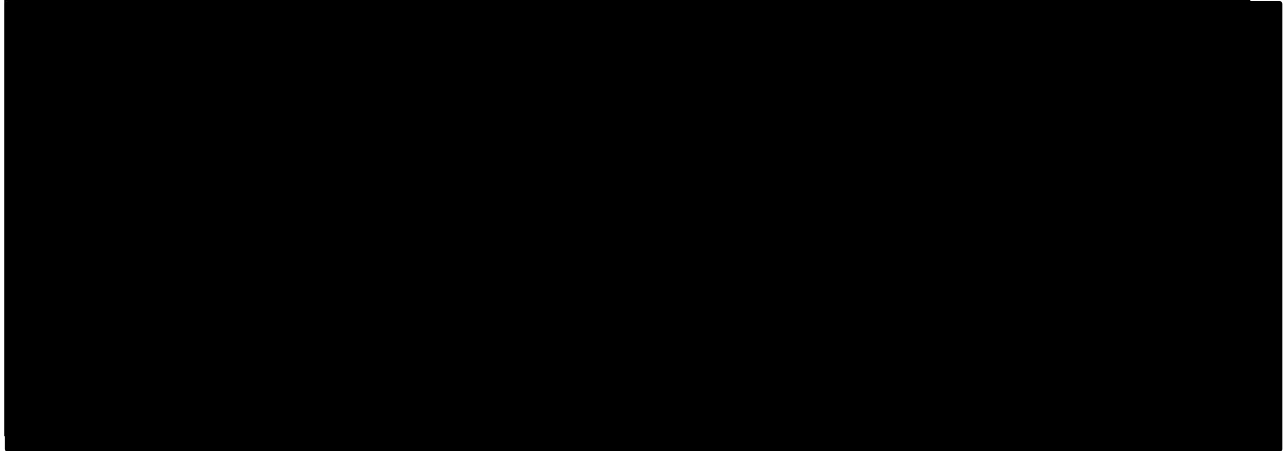
Figure 47: 'Mutt and Jeff', *Sandusky Register,* 13 March 1929.

Similarly, white characters blacked up to imitate blacks at a variety of points. The effect of these gags was also to reinforce popular conceptions of racial difference without explicitly linking this difference to the inferiority of one group or another. This use of blackface in the strips is in line with the longer process by which the blackface tradition was appropriated into other forms of mainstream culture, so that its features – such as costumes, lyrics, imagery and dialect - and the racial codings associated with them became instantly recognisable.[121] As Stephen Johnson (along with the other contributors to his 2012 collection) contends, black face performance from its inception had complex and varied intentions. It could be seen as an integrationist, working-class, populist attempt to parody the white elite or a segregationist and racially derogatory strategy of

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[121] Stephen Johnson, 'Introduction: The Persistence of Blackface and the Minstrel Tradition', in Stephen Johnson, ed., *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Amherst, 2012), p. 5.

reinforcing the white status quo and dehumanising the black population.[122] Or, Johnson argues, it

could be seen as both, a reading that is applicable to the comics' use of blackface.[123] By the time

the strips were in circulation, the blackface tradition was long established: for over a century, the

American people had watched as white stage actors applied burnt cork to their faces as part of

the process of assuming an exaggerated black identity for comedy purposes. Whatever the

specific psychological intentions of the performer and reactions of the audience, the process in

and of itself served to reinforce a society ordered by racial difference, and the social acceptability

– or 'harmlessness' – of using this difference to make fun.

Just like the gags relying on the construction of race, 'blackface' strips did not explicitly mock or

criticise black people. Unlike the minstrel shows from where the practice of blacking up

originated, the white characters in the comic strips did not tend to take on a black persona, or

display any particularly stereotypical or caricatured behaviour. Comic characters blacked up for

three reasons. First, they did it (or watched others do it) purely for their own amusement, much

like they might be depicted watching a play or going to the movie theater, the joke taking place

in a racialised blackface setting, but with a punchline that was not related to it. For instance,

when Abe Kabibble took part in a blackface show at his club, the humour is not derived from the

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[122] Ibid., p. 3.

[123] Eric Lott's influential *Love and Theft* highlights the complexity of blackface performance. Clearly, and particularly in the period immediately following the Civil War, it was racially demeaning, undermining the ability of freedmen to participate in civilised society. Furthermore, it enabled the white audience to form a bond of solidarity based on their racial superiority, something which was very relevant to white immigrant groups – like the Irish - who often participated in blackface performance. Lott, like Johnson et al, also explores the other side of minstrelsy, and the extent to which it can be viewed as a subversive depiction of a powerless culture that enabled working class audiences to 'mock' their social betters. However, despite the multifaceted interpretations of the role and functions of blackface performance, it cannot be denied that at its heart it uses humour as a means of emphasising racial difference, and black inferiority.

fact he is blacked up, but instead from the fact that he did not bother to learn his lines.[124] The second type of blackface skit involved characters assuming the mask in order to transgress social rules and allow them to assume the role of a black person. For instance, Mutt and Jeff blacked up in order to get jobs as train porters.[125] And while the family are on holiday in Florida, Samuel Perkins (of *Polly and Her Pals*) blacks up in order to be able to sing with 'Southern Darkies' without social ostracism – a rare acknowledgement of the Jim Crow system in the South, something that was not explicitly referenced anywhere else in this study.[126] Thirdly, characters inadvertently ended up in blackface as the result of soot dust, or a tar spillage.[127] In these setups, the humour is simple and one-dimensional, derived solely from the fact that the white character now looks black.

In each of these examples, it is possible to make a convincing case for both of the types of intent that Johnson outlines, or indeed argue a case that they had no real intent at all. Abe's blacking up could be construed as a demonstration of Jewish inferiority or, indeed, as an attempt to cast Jews as part of the white mainstream who felt comfortable in adopting a black persona because they were so clearly not black. Mutt and Jeff's need to assume black identities to get jobs as train porters could be viewed as a racially derogatory statement on the position of African Americans in society or as a subversive barb at the system that restricted opportunities to people because of their skin colour. And Pa Perkins' desire to blacken his face and sing with the 'darkies' might be

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124 'Abie the Agent', *Washington Times,* 17 January 1919.
125 'Mutt and Jeff', *El Paso Herald,* 13 July 1910.
126 'Polly and Her Pals', *Sandusky Register*, 9 February 1929.
127 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* 7 February 1922, *Greenville Daily Democrat,* 10 March 1924.

seen as either endorsing or ridiculing the strict racial rules of Jim Crow, depending on the sensibilities of the reader.

Examples of 'structural' or unconscious racism like these, so-called because of the absence of explicitly or deliberately overt negative connotations, were common throughout the period of newspaper funny paper, with common constructs appearing, unchanging, over the years. The tone of these strips was comic rather than spiteful or derogatory, suggesting an attempt by comic artists to elicit scandalised amusement in their readers rather than malicious hostility. However, just as they created humour through the subversion and transgression of social boundaries, they served to reinforce them in the process, the continued use of seemingly harmless racial humour shoring up the wider social attitudes that were also used to justify segregation and racial discrimination across both North and South for more than half a century and continue to structure racial oppression today.
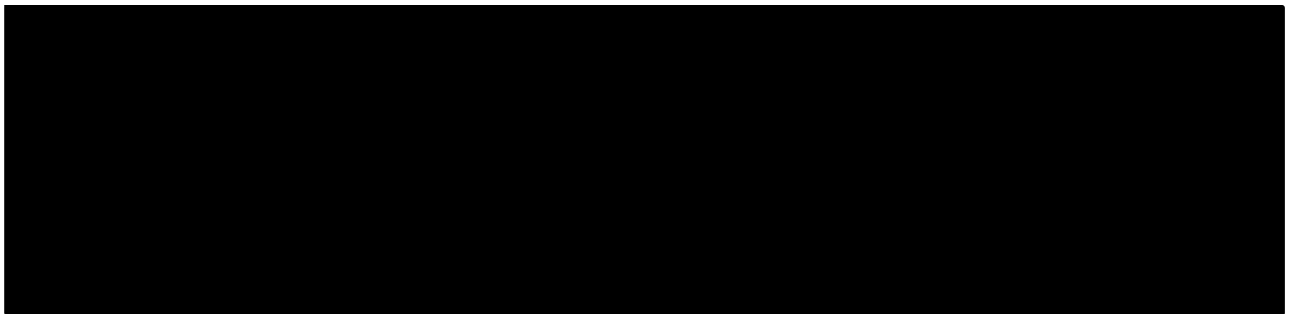
Racial stereotyping

Figure 48:'Bringing Up Father', *Arizona Republican*, 23 January 1920.

In 1915, the *Richmond Times Dispatch* ran an article entitled 'Comedy Character in Real Life'. The author commented on the fact that in comics often 'Sambo' characters are seen 'creeping home by moonlight holding stolen chickens under their arms'. He found it 'delightfully humorous' that in Washington recently a black hotel worker was discovered doing the same thing, and concluded that 'our friend Sambo of the comics is a real personage'.[128] This comment demonstrates the fundamental ubiquity of racism in American culture. It hints at the influence of the mass media in general, and the syndicated comics industry in particular, in giving 'written, narrative clarity' to the often unarticulated racial beliefs of readers. This was a process that ultimately perpetuated a narrative of a world dominated by race, giving legitimacy to popular notions about the racial ordering of humankind.[129] This specific quote is particularly telling. The author is not displaying deliberate malice towards black people: he uses seemingly friendly and almost paternalistic terminology - 'our old friend' - to describe the stock Sambo character that he is referring to. Furthermore, his assessment of the necessity for black people to steal food (on the comics page or in real life) as 'delightfully humorous' served to minimise the importance of the issue of black criminality caused by poverty and hunger, reinforcing the chicken-stealing Sambo stereotype as representative of a black propensity towards poultry theft, rather than the indication of a troubling social issue. The comics, in their attempts to avoid offense and create strips that appealed to Americans across the North and South without being 'harmful', ultimately shored up racist ideology by creating black characters that, while they were not necessarily dangerous or 'bad', conformed to – and perpetuated – established stereotypes.

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[128] 'Comedy Character in Real Life', *Richmond Times Dispatch* (May 1915).
[129] Brian D. Behnken and Gregory D. Smithers, *Racism in American Popular Media: From Aunt Jemima to the Frito Bandito* (Oxford, 2015), p. 1.

The damaging power of racial caricatures is well-documented.[130] As Kerry Soper argues, in a

pervasively racist culture the minority figure cannot establish a positive or true sense of self

because the dominant culture, with its naturalised racist ideologies and accompanying ethnic

stereotypes, only lets him see himself through the revelation of [this dominant] world.[131] James

Dormon notes the role of caricatures in providing justification and rationalisation for social fears:

'…the acceptance of the caricature-as-stereotype-as-reality lay in the psychic needs of middle-

class white America to believe in the image as real, and to argue thereby for immigration

restriction and/or subordination (or elimination) of ethnic minorities.'[132] Indeed, as Dormon

explains, caricatures provided a social valve for the need to rationalise the need to exclude the

Chinese, or provide a reason for why Irish immigrants and freed black slaves had not taken full

advantage of the opportunities afforded to him by American society.[133] As the threat of the new

immigration and the impact of black migration became apparent in the early twentieth century,

the use of such material increased.

While the comics industry was actively discouraging the use of racial stereotypes by the 1940s,

in the earlier decades of the century the strips relied on the racial tropes established in the

nineteenth-century, perpetuated through minstrel shows and then embedded in almost all aspects

of American culture. Comic artists adapted these tropes to the social reality of the twentieth

century, and the need to appeal to a widespread national audience. By the 1920s at least, there

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[130] See Lawrence, 'Unconscious racism revisited' for a powerful explanation of the way that literature using racial caricatures affects black audiences.
[131] Soper, 'From Swarthy Ape to Sympathetic Everyman and Subversive Trickster', p. 262.
[132] James Dormon, 'Ethnic Stereotyping in American Popular Culture: The Depiction of American Ethnics in the Cartoon Periodicals of the Gilded Age', *Amerikastudien*, 30 (1985), p. 493.
[133] Ibid., p. 492.

was a degree of social awareness of the prevalence of these stereotypes, and the damage they caused. Martha Jane Nadell has traced the debates about the representation of African Americans through the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, in particular the envisioning of the concept of the 'New Negro' by the Harlem Renaissance.[134] This discourse was not limited to the black press. Indeed a 1924 piece in *Vanity Fair* written by Eric Walrond heralded the introduction of a 'New Negro' in popular culture, imploring readers to say good bye to the worn stereotypes of Mammy, Uncle Tom and Sambo.[135] Walrond declared hopefully that '…the Negro now emerges as an individual, an individual as brisk and actual as your own next-door neighbour. He no longer has to be either a Pullman car porter, or over-fond of watermelon, in order to be a successful type…'[136]

Regardless of the existence of this debate, the 'Old Negro' continued to dominate in mass culture. Nadell acknowledged the 'derogatory and old-fashioned images of African Americans [that] still proliferated in magazine advertisements. Pictures of grinning black children were used to sell everything from gelatine to soap to baking powder'.[137] The black stereotypes that originated in blackface minstrelsy were embedded in popular advertising trademarks like Aunt Jemima's pancakes and Uncle Ben's rice, which were 'capable of communicating at a glance accumulated stores of racial knowledge'.[138] Tom Holt's essay on race marking, which argues that 'it is in small everyday actions and interactions that race is reproduced through the marking

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[134] Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass, 2004).
[135] Ibid., p. 17.
[136] Eric Walrond, 'Enter The New Negro, a Distinctive Type Recently Created by the Coloured Cabaret Belt in New York', *Vanity Fair* (December 1924).
[137] Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes*, p. 17.
[138] Holt, 'Marking Race', pp. 16–17.

of the racial 'other' – that racist ideas are naturalized, made self-evident, thus seemingly beyond audible challenge', points to the authenticity, nurturance, and reassurance of subordination that these 'smiling visages of… seemingly familiar figures' provided.[139]

Appearances by black characters were split into two types: recurring characters who were integral to the strips in which they appeared, and non-recurring (and usually nameless) black 'extras' who were seen frequently in the vast majority of the funny papers in the study. Only two comics - *The Gumps* and *Tillie the Toiler* - maintained an almost exclusively white cast, with only five and four appearances of black characters noted respectively across their entire run.[140] When Andy and Min Gump go on vacation to Palm Springs in 1925, the scene features a large number of black servants, a sight that had been fairly absent from their northern lifestyle.[141] The remainder of the strips used many black extras; usually nameless characters who appeared in narrowly defined roles, often without speaking or moving over the panels of the strip. These characters either worked in service positions (bellboys, train porters, waiters, chauffeurs, messengers, elevator operators) or were criminals or vagrants. In only three out of over 26,000 strips are black characters depicted in non-service professions. A 1919 *Doings of the Duffs* strip sees a completely inept black policeman coming to the rescue of the Duffs' (black) maid.[142] In May 1933, Mutt and Jeff are in a court with a black clerk.[143] Finally, in 1926, Harry Wills, a

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[139] Ibid.
[140] A black train porter appeared in 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 22 July 1918; a black waiter in 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 22 January 1921; a black chauffeur in 'The Gumps', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 3 January 1922; a black audience member in 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star*, 26 September 1924; a black window cleaner in 'Tillie the Toiler', *East Liverpool Review Tribune,* 7 July 1932; a black handyman in 'Tillie the Toiler', *East Liverpool Review Tribune,* 26 August 1933; a black train porter in 'Tillie the Toiler', *East Liverpool Review Tribune*, 26 June 1934; a black guard in 'Tillie the Toiler' *East Liverpool Review Tribune,* 28 May 1935.
[141] 'The Gumps', *Lincoln Star*, 5 February 1925.
[142] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* 17 March 1919.
[143] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Syracuse Herald,* 20 May 1933.

black heavyweight boxing champion, makes a cameo and Mutt is embarrassed to have referred to him as a "bozo".[144] In this regard, the comics industry lagged far behind other industries, with around 20% of black parts in Hollywood featuring people in non-service professions.[145]

Significantly, black women were never depicted outside the home. The one exception to this rule was Mutt and Jeff's landlady, whose skin colour becomes the centre of several days' worth of jokes.[146] Otherwise, female black characters appeared solely as maids, cooks and (very occasionally) children, their existence and identity confined to the domestic sphere of the white family they served. Even including those inside the home, the comics featured far fewer black women than men. By contrast, the vast majority of black characters (recurring and extras) were situated in the public sphere, either working in positions serving white characters or gaining attention by not working at all. This meant that white women in the strip almost never came into direct contact with black men, except for those that had been accepted into their family unit, perhaps demonstrating a deliberate attempt by the comics to avoid potentially incendiary material. The spectre of the black rapist was a central element of the Jim Crow South, with the rape of white women by black men representing an attack on the heart of white patriarchal civilisation and often resulting in mob violence and lynchings.[147] Any contact between white women and black men could be seen as controversial and even dangerous, and it is likely that the comic syndicates would have wanted to avoid offending Southern whites, who made up a large part of their readership.

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[144] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Ada Evening News,* 20 September 1926.
[145] Cripps, *Slow fade to black*, p. 112.
[146] 'Mutt and Jeff', *Topeka Daily State Journal,* 6, 8, 9 September 1916).
[147] Lisa Lindquist Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race in Virginia, 1900-1960* (Chapel Hill, 2004), p. 19.

The few black women to feature as main characters on the comic page were created in the

familiar image of Aunt Jemima, herself a version of the plantation-based 'Mammy' character of

antebellum Southern memory. Catapulted to stardom through her role as the brand icon for

packet pancake mix, the character of Aunt Jemima was popularised during minstrel shows

featuring women who were 'headstrong, fat, and simple-minded… a companion of the country

dullard Jim Crow and his foppish city cousin, Zip Coon.'[148] These women were superstitious and

old-fashioned, alarmed and confused by any advance in technology, with their inability to cope

making them the butt of the joke for white audiences. In the kitchen, however, she was an

unchallenged expert, 'the cook for an idealized version of the Old South, a land of good food,

beautiful but fragile white women, warm weather, gentility and leisure.'[149] As Maurice Manring

explains, the Jemima image had her roots in the Old and the New South, and she was a figure

that resonated with northerners and southerners alike.[150] The cultural concept of the mammy,

perhaps most famously portrayed by Hattie McDaniel in the 1940 Hollywood blockbuster *Gone

with the Wind*, represented an enduring reminder of the mythic antebellum south.

Black cooks and maids – by far the most common occupation for black women in this period –

appear in several of the strips at various points, but two comic artists in particular adapted the

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[148] Maurice M. Manring, 'Aunt Jemima Explained: The Old South, the Absent Mistress, and the Slave in a Box', *Southern Cultures*, 2 (1995), p. 21.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.

Aunt Jemima trope for a national audience. Walter Allman's Pansy and Frank King's Rachel were created out of the Mammy of the Old South, but situated in the modern, northern middle-class households depicted in Doings of the Duffs and Gasoline Alley. As such, they represented the increasing visibility of the 'common if not conspicuous figure' of the Black Maid in the turn-of-the-century urban landscape.[151] They also, however served to add validation to the limiting of opportunities for black women to this sort of role. Pansy and Rachel first appeared on the comics page in 1916 and 1921 respectively, in line with a more general cultural move towards the depiction of black female domestics in Hollywood movies. The first two decades of the twentieth century had seen domestic work 'become a kind of cultural shorthand for Black women and their social position in the United States'.[152] Even before the Great Migration of black southerners to Northern cities during World War One, a slower but substantial migration of black workers had occurred, with many southern black women finding employment as household servants in northern cities. By the time of the Great Depression, even relatively poor whites could afford to employ a black maid, with one in five families with an income of under $1000 a year recorded as having black household help.[153]

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[151] Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp, *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices* (Berkeley, 2004), p. 111.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 2006), p. 32.

Figure 49: "Pansy". 'Doings of the Duffs', *Lebanon Daily News,* 2 May 1929.

Pansy's first appearance in the Duff household is in the kitchen. She is standing over a pot, when a white man (presumably a valet) enters, saying 'The Madam sent me to see if I can be of help to you cook'. Pansy ignores him and he tries again: 'Did you hear me cook?' 'Who you all callin' cook?' Pansy retorts. The man's response, 'You do the cooking don't you? So naturally you are the cook' angers Pansy, who forcibly throws him from the kitchen, along with a selection of utensils, pots and pans, shouting 'Yas, I'se de cook and dese are some of de things I cooks wiv!!'[154] This is not the last time that Pansy kicks a man out of her kitchen: Wilbur Duff and a future suitor of Olivia Duff meet the same fate.[155] Pansy's husband, who only occasionally enters the strip, is a criminal vagrant who uses razors for 'social purposes'.[156] Her appearance would have been reassuringly familiar to white Americans. Her facial features are almost animalistic, and the expanse of white around the mouth and eyes creates an effect reminiscent of blacked-up whites in minstrel shows and on the vaudeville stage. She lacks expression, her eyes usually wide and slightly vacant. Her shapeless figure contrasted sharply with her statuesque and

[154] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Sheboygan Press,* 17 March 1916.
[155] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Tacoma Times,* 22 January 1918, *Seattle Star,* 5 November 1919.
[156] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Sheboygan Press,* 4 May 1916.

beautiful white mistress Helen. The contrast between the two women is often used to draw attention to Pansy's lack of femininity; when Helen has her hair permed for $40, Pansy preens her own Afro, declaring that she herself is a 'millionnaire in waves!'[157] In another strip exploring the connections between race and gender identity, Tom Duff (the man of the house) bemoans the fact that Helen and Olivia insist on wearing 'mannish' overalls when they do yard work. Complaining to Pansy, he says that she does most of the work, but she doesn't feel the need to 'ape' the men![158] In this particular strip, the joke is multifaceted. Unlike her white mistresses, Pansy may be wearing a dress in the scene, but the humour is derived from the shock on Tom's face when she turns round and he sees that she is also smoking a pipe, a decidedly masculine image. The idea that Pansy could, as in Tom's words, 'set an example' to Helen and Olivia in how to dress would have provided the audience with a laugh enriched with smug superiority; for her to do so would be a clear violation of the interracial domestic set up. In another strip published eleven years later, Pansy decides to go blonde and apply yellow make up in an attempt to disguise her appearance. The effect is an odd distortion of the typical blackface image; her features are softened but she is unable to conceal her dark skin, despite being told by Tom that she looks 'pale'.[159] Pansy is deeply religious, her horror at serving devilled ham on a day when the minister is due to call providing a punchline on more than one occasion.[160]

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[157] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Tacoma Times*, 28 February 1918.
[158] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Sheboygan Press*, 9 September 1916.
[159] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Sheboygan Press,* 16 March 1927.
[160] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* 24 March 1919, *Lebanon Daily News,* 2 May 1929.
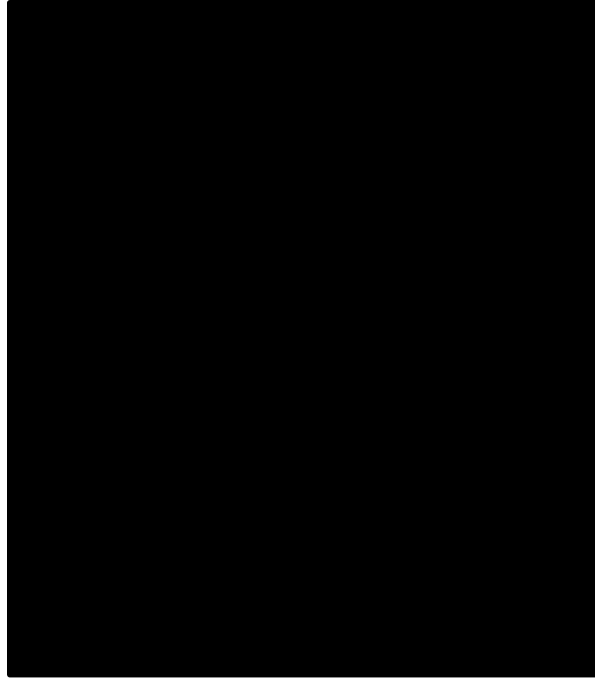
Figure 50: "Rachel". Detail from 'Gasoline Alley', *Washington Post*, 14 May 1923.

Rachel, the cook-come-nursemaid hired by Walt Wallet to take care of baby Skeezix after his

arrival in Gasoline Alley in 1921, shares many physical characteristics with Pansy, including the

large and unshapely physique, glazed-over eyes and white expanse around the mouth area.

Unlike the classic Aunt Jemima stereotype, she is also depicted as physically violent.[161] She

violates fewer social boundaries through her actions however, as they are confined to scrapping

with Mandy, the 'no count black maid' that works for their next-door neighbour.[162] Originally

from Alabama, Rachel returns home to her family in a rare strip depicting Southern life, and

specifically the Southern black community, released by Frank King in August 1927.[163] Like

Pansy, she is both religious and superstitious. She is exceptionally loyal, coming to the defence

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[161] Violence as a character trait was often ascribed to Irish cooks in the nineteenth century, but the classic Aunt Jemima stereotype of the docile and loving black cook presented a palatable alternative to the northern white middle class.
[162] 'Gasoline Alley', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 21 January 1922.
[163] 'Gasoline Alley', *Massillon Evening Independent,* 24 August 1927.

of the family members at various times. Of all the black characters in the strip, Rachel is probably the most developed. Unlike the majority of black characters, who appear only alongside their white employers, Rachel is given her own storylines on a number of occasions. While these are never particularly complex (they often revolved around a love triangle involving Rachel, another black maid and a black chauffeur) they did represent a far greater level of character development than was afforded any other black character in the comics in this era.

For both women, a lack of intelligence (Pansy once goes to buy a three-cent stamp and when offered a two- and a one-cent stamp instead declares she 'aint got no time to be foolin' round addin' up', and Rachel is unable to understand long words) does not detract from their centrality to the smooth running of the house.[164] Pansy's position within the home, and her capability - and indispensability - as the family's cook is made clear by Allman (and later his successor, Ben Batsford) in several strips, hinting at tensions around white dependence on a racial other. When a neighbour tries to poach her from the Duffs, Helen gives Pansy a payrise.[165] A visit from Helen's mother causes upset when she takes over in the kitchen, and a distraught Pansy threatens to leave, but is persuaded to stay by Tom, who takes Pansy's side over his mother-in-law's.[166] On one occasion Pansy does actually decide to leave, and the family struggles in her absence, with Tom deeply dissatisfied by Helen's attempts to prepare meals: unlike Pansy, who can make eggs four ways, Helen's offerings are all straight out of a can.[167] Rachel also clashes with a boss' mother - Walt's - one Christmas, and he diplomatically removes her from Rachel's kitchen.[168]

[164] 'Doings of the Duffs, *Seattle Star,* 13 January 1919; 'Gasoline Alley', *Bakersfield Californian,* 23 July 1931.
[165] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* 13 October 1919.
[166] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* 11 February 1920.
[167] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Seattle Star,* 27 November 1920.
[168] 'Doings of the Duffs', *Philadelphia Public Ledger,* 23 December 1921.

Much like Pansy, Rachel is indispensable to Walt Wallet and later to his wife and children. When she goes on vacation, they all find they cannot cope without her to organise the house.[169] She has such a substantial role in bringing up Skeezix, Walt's adopted son, that when his wife falls pregnant some years later, Rachel directly points out to the strip's audience that Walt really cannot take any credit for Skeezix, it was her who brought him up after all.[170] When Walt and his wife go on an extended vacation to England, Rachel is left in charge of the house and the children for weeks at a time, with no other supervision.[171]

The comics' treatment of the black maid differs slightly from other forms of American culture at this time. In his study of American advertising in the period, Roland Marchand noted that black maids almost never appeared in adverts for consumer products, with companies preferring to depict white women dressed in the fashionable French Maid style. Explaining this anomaly between the social reality and the world created on billboards and in magazines, Marchand suggested that perhaps this was down to advertisers not wanting to make female consumers (who were the primary buyers targetted by the ads) uncomfortable by reminding them of their reliance on black women for help in the house.[172] David Katzman's exploration of the effect of the tension on the black servants in *Seven Days a Week* offers a different interpretation, arguing that the woman-to-woman relationship of domestic servitude could be freeing for middle-class white women, but psychologically damaging for the black servants.[173] Both of these studies highlight the tensions evident in the long history of white reliance on black domestic help.

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[169] 'Gasoline Alley', *Charleston Daily Telegraph,* 9 September 1924.
[170] 'Gasoline Alley', *Hamilton Evening Journal,* 12 June 1928.
[171] 'Gasoline Alley', *Bakersfield Californian,* 12 January 1932.
[172] Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, pp. 202–205.
[173] Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, p. 270.

While the comics did not shy away from - and in fact embraced - the idea of the black maid, the

tension between white mistresses and their black help did affect their relationships on the comic

pages, in line with common Gilded Age cultural tropes. In every strip featuring a black maid, it is

the master and not the mistress of the house who uses the maid as an ally, often forming

temporary alliances against their wives, mothers-in-law or children. The relationships between

the maids and their male bosses are often friendly, with them often depicted in casual

conversation. By contrast, the relationship between the lady of the house and her black maid is

more hierarchical and structured, set firmly in the context of their respective roles as mistress and

servant. Women are seen giving orders and instructions or discussing maids' performance but

never engaging in friendly conversation or treating maids as their peers. As such, the persona of

the Northern twentieth-century Mammy personified by Pansy and Rachel was able to be given

personality, humanity and skill and even receive affection, without challenging the superior

status of her white mistress.

Rachel and Pansy represented the careful lines drawn by the comic industry in its engagement

with race issues in this period. In some ways, the two women represented a real cultural advance,

some of the first developed central black characters to appear in any mainstream cultural product

in the era. As Thomas Cripps has documented fairly unequivocally, early Hollywood continued

to rely on old Southern stereotypes until the 1940s.[174] Rachel and Pansy appeared in hundreds of

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[174] Cripps, *Slow fade to black*, p. 5. Cripps argues that the first 10 years of silent movies (1895-1905) actually saw blacks portrayed in a fairly wide ranging set of roles, far more varied that they would in everyday life. But as the industry matured into a nationwide system, blacks 'all but disappeared from the screen', a situation that would endure until World War Two.

separate strips over a period of many years, both achieving a level of character development similar to their white counterparts on the comic page. However, both women are, ultimately, cut from the same cloth as the big-screen Mammy characters played by actresses like Louise Beavers and Hattie McDaniel in the same period, whose performances were met with criticism from commentators who accused them of reinforcing black inferiority and idealising race relations in the Antebellum South.[175] The key difference in the comics was that the Mammy role had been reimagined to fit into contemporary middle-class households, rather than being portrayed in any kind of historical context of the Old South. While this was a fairly accurate depiction of job opportunities available to African-American women in the early twentieth century, the continued reliance of the Mammy caricature shored up the economic oppression of black women. As such, the black women of the comic page served to reinforce and validate the social structure of white superiority and black servitude as it suited the needs of a mass white audience in the North and South, but avoiding deliberately provoking the criticism of black interest groups or readers.

The lazy black manservant: bridging the gap between 'coon' and Stepin Fetchit

Unlike the female characters of Rachel and Pansy, who fulfilled many of the cultural requirements of the traditional Southern Mammy stereotype while also fitting into a modern, middle-class northern household, the comics made no attempt to create black male characters with any level of positive character development. While a few comics did feature recurring black

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[175] Todd Boyd, *African Americans and Popular Culture [3 volumes]* (30 October 2008), p. 69.

male characters, these stayed very close to existing racial tropes, and focused primarily on three negative characteristics: laziness, stupidity and criminality. The men fitting this description represented an early version of the degrading racial caricature that would by the 1930s become synonymous with the name Stepin Fetchit, a comedy actor (real name Lincoln Theodore Monroe Perry) who played a 'comedy relief role' in numerous motion pictures in the first half of the twentieth century. His character, like those of the comics page, epitomised the African American stereotype of a 'shiftless, lazy servant of low intelligence who bowed and scraped at the feet of white actors at every opportunity', and who had his roots in the enduring language of slaveholders who described their slaves as workshy, stupid and wilful.[176] As Champ Clark writes, unlike the comic everyman portrayed by white actors (and, as evidenced by Kerry Soper, embraced by Irish personalities like Happy Hooligan and Jiggs) because the Stepin Fetchit persona was black, he was 'officially denied an on-screen humanity', existing only within white society's rigid wish-fulfilling parameters.[177] Fetchit did not appear on the big screen until 1927, but the comics pages had paved the way for his success in the decades prior to this by adapting the existing 'coon' stereotype, whose double-identity embraced both subservience and subversiveness, removing from the antebellum setting of the carnival plantation shows and historical novels, and situating him in the middle-class northern households of the funny papers.

The stereotype of the lazy slave, as exemplified in the 'coon' caricature, was created on the plantation, used as an excuse by slaveholders to justify brutal disciplinary practices and was then adapted during Reconstruction to ease white fears about the threats of freed white slaves.

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[176] Champ Clark, *Shuffling to Ignominy: The Tragedy of Stepin Fetchit* (Lincoln, NE., 2005), p.xi.
[177] Ibid., p. 2.

Catherine Roth posits that the coon caricature reassured whites that freed slaves were inherently inept and therefore posed no threat of job competition, something that became equally necessary in the North as large numbers of freed slaves migrated.[178] The desexualising of the coon stereotype set him apart from the threatening black brute or savage, again providing reassurance to whites afraid of the sexual threat of black men mixing with white women.[179] Indeed, no brutish character can be found in any funny paper in this study. As Danielle Sarver Coombs and Bob Batchelor argue, the coon caricature 'was the comic relief for racial tension, the pressure valve that allowed whites to rewrite race. Black slaves were not oppressed humans longing for freedom, they were lazy subhumans who did not have a thought besides stealing watermelons.'[180] Unapologetically racist, the racial stereotypes employed in adverts and on the comics page ushered the country into the Jim Crow era, providing visual reminders of the inherent characteristics of both black and white people, justifying the ordering of a modern industrial society based on the same ideological system that had structured slavery in the antebellum South.

The male black servant was a constant feature of the funny papers, appearing in different guises across several strips, over the entire 35 year period studied. Two strips deserve particular attention, demonstrating the endurance of the 'coon' caricature well into the twentieth century. The first is *Bringing Up Father*, whose creator George McManus used variations of the coon caricature as both recurring characters and for one-off appearances. First introduced in March

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[178] Catherine Roth, 'The Coon Chicken Inn: North Seattle's Beacon of Bigotry', *The Seattle Civil Rights Labor History Project* (2009).
[179] Danielle Sarver Coombs and Bob Batchelor, *We Are What We Sell: How Advertising Shapes American Life ... And Always Has* (Oxford, 2014), p. 93.
[180] Ibid.

1916 when he is asking for a day off to visit his pathologically lazy brother, Jasper the servant

(one of the only recurring black male characters in any strip) is defined primarily by his laziness,

and is fired on several occasions for his lack of activity.[181] Jiggs jokes that Jasper moves so

slowly that he (Jiggs) cannot even be sure whether Jasper is awake. In one strip, he sarcastically

asks Jasper to take the tortoise out for a run, as long as that is not too much effort for him.[182]

Unlike the female servants created in the image of the Mammy trope, who develop their own

personalities and are integral to the running of the household, the black male servant is only

depicted in negative terms. Useless as well as lazy, Jasper burns holes in Jiggs' good clothes

within days of being rehired by Maggie.[183] His lack of humanity is evidenced by the ease with

which McManus swaps him out for other servants without feeling the need to explain his

absence: he is replaced once by 'Sambo' and then later by 'Rastus'.[184] The choice of such

pejorative names by McManus is meaningful; by choosing them, he made a deliberate and

explicit connection to minstrelsy culture and the racial heritage of the slave-system, legitimising

the use of racial slurs for light comic relief.

The second strip to feature a recurring black male servant was *Polly and Her Pals*, who added

the unimaginatively-named 'Cocoa' to the household in 1929. Cocoa is initially introduced when

Ashur (a junior member of the Perkins clan) decides to become a fight manager, and quite

literally unpacks Cocoa from a suitcase.[185] Cocoa, who despite being so lazy and soporific that

he is described as a 'sawn off sleepwalker', and regularly falls asleep standing up, promptly

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[181] 'Bringing Up Father', *Omaha Daily Bee,* 7 March 1916.
[182] *'*Bringing Up Father'*, Topeka Daily State Journal*, 8 November 1916.
[183] 'Bringing Up Father', *El Paso Herald,* 15 April 1916.
[184] 'Bringing Up Father', *Harrisburg Telegraph,* 15 June 1916, *El Paso Herald,* 24 June 1916.
[185] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Sandusky Register,* 8 October 1929.

beats Neewah to a pulp and then proceeds to sit cracking coconuts with his bare fists.[186] Cocoa is explicitly designated as being Ethiopian, rather than having roots in slavery. In one strip, a larger boxer refuses to fight Cocoa, saying (much to the astonished confusion of Ashur) that he 'draws the color line'.[187] This set up addresses the shift from a racial system defined by slavery (and thus theoretically confined to blacks of West-African descent) to one where white people define racial hierarchy, based not on place of origin or a historical connection to the slave system, but solely based on skin colour. This designation, though, does not prevent Sterrett from casting Cocoa firmly in the plantation 'coon' mould once the family (demonstrating a rather paternalistic attitude) take him in and retrain him to be a valet. Like McManus, Sterrett uses racial language to make this connection clear, with Pa Perkins referring to Cocoa as both a 'pickaninny' and a 'tar baby'.[188] Later, Cocoa's position as a watermelon-loving, chicken-stealing caricature is cemented quite literally when the family moves to a farm. Cocoa, aware that the family cannot afford to buy much livestock, takes it upon himself to thieve the neighbours' hens and then, trying to impress Polly, goes out to steal a cow.[189] Pa's response to the attempted cattle theft is to tie Cocoa to a tree and leave him there alone, a scene whose disturbing allusions to the actions of lynch mobs in the South and West must surely have resonated with the comic's readers.

The only strip to depart from the derogatory 'coon' caricature in its portrayal of male black servants (and their relationship with the white people they served) was Harry Hershfield's *Abie the Agent*. Hershfield's treatment of black characters overall was more generous than the vast

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[186] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Sandusky Register,* (9, 10 October 1929).
[187] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Sandusky Register*, 16 October 1929.
[188] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Sandusky Register* (22, 31 October 1929).
[189] 'Polly and Her Pals', *East Liverpool Review Tribune* (10, 25 July 1933).

majority of his counterparts. While he still depicted black characters solely in service roles, he did not utilise the same range of negative associated stereotypes as the other comics in the sample. I have, in previous work, noted the complex ways in which two of the comic artists in this study - George McManus and Harry Hershfield - played with notions of racial hierarchy by how their protagonists, both European immigrants, interacted with white characters. Challenging claims made elsewhere that the treatment of black characters in *Abie the Agent* was evidence of racial anxiety, and an attempt by Hershfield to shore up the extent to which Abe (and by extension all Jews) were seen as white, I argued that in fact, Hershfield's humour was multilayered and displayed 'a relaxed ambivalence to issues of racial superiority'. Abe was often pictured on friendly terms with black employees, and Hershfield often allowed Abe to violate social and racial norms in order to create a larger laugh. On one occasion, Abie tells some friends about a restaurant that he frequents regularly, the Heatherbloom Inn, where you can get 'fabulous food' for just three bucks a plate. The men are passing the Inn one night, expecting to find Abe there, but they cannot see him in the dining room. The final panel shows Abe sitting eating amongst the chauffeurs (some black, some white). One of the black chauffeurs reveals the joke: 'And mah boss got to pay three bucks for the same thing in the other room, for what costs us only one buck!' In this instance, Abe's conformity to the Jewish penny-pinching stereotype is stronger than any desire to separate himself from the black employees that are so clearly below him in the social structure. The success of this joke requires the reader to accept the premise that Abe as an American Jew is superior to his chauffeur, making their sharing a meal a clear violation of racial norms. Therefore Abe's subversion of the racial boundary actually serves to reinforce it. Additionally, while the joke mocks Abe for his penny pinching, it also metes out a

little mockery towards the men in the main restaurant, laughed at by their servants for paying so inflated a price for the same dinner.[190]

Similarly, George McManus was comfortable putting Jiggs in situations where he - a working-class Irishman - would be compared with black characters. The main difference between McManus and Hershfield was that McManus repeatedly portrayed black characters in negative terms, focusing on their laziness, criminality and stupidity. McManus often deliberately constructed these comparisons for comedic effect. For example in one strip, Jiggs apprehends a black burglar breaking into his house. Discovering that the burglar has stolen a beer from Jiggs' next door neighbour, Jiggs befriends the crook and sends him back to get another so they can drink one each.[191] On another occasion, Dugan (one of Jiggs' Irish friends) needs to write a message in a book for Jiggs to give to Maggie. Dugan, though, cannot write. He approaches a black child and offers to pay him to do the writing for him. The child is happy to oblige, but tells Dugan 'I can do de writing but you will have to do de spelling.' Here, as in several other examples, working class Irish and black positions are conflated by their equal lack of literacy.[192]

Like Hershfield, McManus complicated ideas about racial hierarchy in order to provide humour. In both examples, humour is derived from the fact that the strip ends with a slight violation of both the reader's expectations and social rules of racial conduct. Both strips would be amusing even without the racial element: the fact that the master of the house ends up having a beer with

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[190] Abie the Agent', *Washington Times*, 23 July 1918; Hilary Fraser, 'Immigrants, Ethnic Humour and the Newspaper Comic Strip'.
[191] 'Bringing Up Father', *Omaha Daily Bee,* 7 September 1913.
[192] For more examples, see Fraser, 'Immigrants, Ethnic Humour and the Newspaper Comic Strip, 2012.

a burglar would be a comic twist in and of itself. Indeed, a similar set up was used in *Polly and Her Pals*, minus the race element, when Sam Perkins discovers a (white) burglar looking for money in his house and instead of calling the police, decides to join him in the hunt.[193] The addition of the racial dimension by McManus might be seen as his way of acknowledging the fact that Irish immigrants in America had often been compared to blacks, but ultimately dispelling this idea through satire. The fact that on many other occasions, Jiggs was depicted both socially and physically dominating black servants and employees suggests that McManus - and presumably his intended audience - was in no doubt as to the respective positions of both Irish and black Americans in the racial hierarchy; interactions between the two continually reinforcing their fundamental difference, rather than suggesting any similarity.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the proactive effort of syndicate bosses to avoid any 'harmful' racial stereotypes, the comics' treatment of race was far from progressive, reflecting rather than challenging the unquestioning and ubiquitous racism accepted in everyday American life. While overt racism (which could be found in many other mainstream forms of entertainment) was extremely rare in the strips, the structural use of race as a concept and the reliance on black stereotypes reinforced racial hierarchies and served to define an American mainstream united in unambiguous whiteness. Two comics - *Doings of the Duffs* and *Gasoline Alley* - did create principal black characters that were developed and humane with many positive traits that featured prominently in those two strips for many years. However, even these two women were created in the mould of an antebellum Mammy stereotype, that, while adapted to the realities of

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[193] 'Bringing Up Father', *East Liverpool Review Tribune,* 2 May 1931.

twentieth-century life, reinforced white superiority and made the lower middle-class domestic sphere a space for the domination of black women. That the strips' limited designation of black characters to service roles was a reasonable reflection of reality does not detract from the fact that by shoring up this depiction of reality with stereotypes of laziness, stupidity and criminality, the strips ultimately justified black servitude and subordination.

East Asians

Far Eastern characters did not often feature in the comics in this study. This was likely due to the fact that the 'yellow peril'- which had gripped the nation as the nineteenth century drew to a close - had begun to abate in the first decades of the twentieth.[194] This absence likely implies a general lessening of interest in their position within the social and racial hierarchies of the day, and the downgrading of the perceived threat posed by East Asians in this period. Three of the comics in this study featured a recurring East Asian character, though two lacked any real character development. First, *The Katzenjammer Kids* employed a Chinese cook from December 1915, who makes chop suey while singing 'it's a long way to Tipperary'. He appears on a few occasions over the next six months before disappearing from the strip.[195] *The Gumps* – whose entirely white cast was noticeably devoid of black, Asian or identifiably immigrant characters – introduced a Chinese mystic (Ching Chow) into the Sunday strip from 1927, as a sidekick for the

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[194] Dale T. Knobel, America for the Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States (New York: London, 1996), p. 230.
[195] 'The Katzenjammer Kids', *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, 25 December 1915. His last noted appearance is in May 1916, and by September 1916 the family now have a black cook in position.

Gumps' son Chester. Ching Chow soon gained a spin-off strip, 'The Wisdom of Ching Chow', in which he would provide a one-liner in the manner of a fortune-cookie. The strip, drawn by Sidney Smith for the Chicago Tribune syndicate, lasted into the 1980s, despite its controversial use of one-dimensional Asian stereotypes.[196]

The only comic to feature a developed Asian character was *Polly and Her Pals*, who introduced Neewah the valet in 1915. Neewah featured on hundreds of occasions in the years that followed, acting primarily as a male sidekick for Pa Perkins. Neewah's racial origin is not explicitly revealed, but a couple of cultural references suggest that he is Japanese and not Chinese: he knows jiu jitsu (a Japanese martial art) and is able to provide the answer to a crossword clue on Japanese curse words in 1925.[197] The complex in-between racial status of East Asians is ever-present in the strip, with Neewah frequently referred to as 'yaller' (yellow) by the Perkins family. On one occasion, Neewah himself refers to his employers - and all Americans - as 'pale faces'.[198] Yet despite this, when the family embrace a camouflage fad in 1919, Neewah dresses up as Pa, able to put on a literal white mask and conceal his racial inbetweeness. Portrayed alongside Delicia getting dressed up as Polly, the two pairings are described as equal and parallel, summarised in the strapline 'It's Alright - Good Impersonation All Round'.[199] Neewah is sometimes casually described in strip bylines as Oriental, more than once in the context of him managing to display a positive trait despite being Oriental. He goes to night school to learn to

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[196] 'http://www.umich.edu/~csie/comicart/StripArt/chingchow/chingchow.html' [last accessed 5 May 2019].
[197] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Hamilton Evening Journal,* 12 December 1925.
[198] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times*, 28 December 1917.
[199] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times*, 21 March 1919.

speak proper English, and soon shows up his boss' linguistic shortcomings, happy to call Pa up on his own poor pronunciation of English words.[200]

Neewah's character is considerably more developed and allowed greater parity with the members of the Perkins family than any black servant character across any of the strips. While he is often described in racial terms, Cliff Sterrett rarely defines Neewah in the style of Asian caricatures. Though Neewah is Japanese and not Chinese, this distinction is not made explicitly at any point, meaning many readers may well have assumed him to be from China. He fulfils a sidekick role for Samuel Perkins, who regularly asks his valet for advice, discusses a variety of matters and concocts various schemes with him. His actions are not always restricted to his servant role, with his comedic function more commonly serving as a foil to one of the other family members. When Neewah's father visits, he is welcomed by the Perkinses into their home and, like his son, treated like one of the family.[201] Neewah features regularly in the strip from his first appearance in 1915, although his appearances become less frequent in 1929 with the arrival of Cocoa, the Ethiopian valet.

Un-named Asian 'extras' feature more commonly than do European immigrants in the mainstream strips, though when they do appear their function is entirely defined inside the limitations of Asian stereotypes and their racial identity. Reflecting the gendered nature of the Chinese population in the States (as Sucheng Chan has noted, there was a pronounced shortage of Chinese women residing in America prior to World War Two) all Far Eastern characters are

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[200] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Steubenville Herald Star*, 19 October 1925.
[201] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Washington Times,* 29 April 1918.

males.[202] 'Orientals' appear either to highlight racial difference (as in the strip discussed earlier, when Jeff brings back a Chinese man instead of a child) or as stock characters: laundrymen or mystics. *The Katzenjammer Kids* includes a violent Chinese pirate in 1917. There is a single reference in *Polly and Her Pals* to the upstairs neighbours arguing in Chinese – the punchline of the joke being that Ma is unable to eavesdrop effectively.[203] This particular reference is interesting, and rare, as it implies that the Perkins family live in a building alongside Asians who are neighbours (suggesting a level of parity) rather than staff. Similarly, in a 1935 *Bungle Family* strip, Jo Bungle gets very worked up over the fortune-tellers who have moved in next door.[204]

Occasionally, racial stereotypes were subverted to mock not the Asian character, but the racist attitude of one of the white protagonists. This tactic was employed on more than one occasion by George McManus, who has Jiggs assume that one of Maggie's Chinese acquaintances (once his Mahjong teacher and several times a visiting prince or diplomat) is a laundryman.[205] In these instances it is Jiggs' lack of cultural awareness and limited worldview that is the source of the punchline, rather than the actions or nature of the Chinese character he misidentifies. This tactic was unusual however. For the most part, the Asians that appeared on the comic page did so simply as a nod to well-worn and deeply entrenched stereotypes that could be relied upon to elicit a laugh from a public used to the comedic construct of the Chinese mystic or semi-literate Chinese laundryman. Far Eastern characters were clearly understood to be racially different to

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[202] Sucheng Chan, 'The Exclusion of Chinese Women', in Sucheng Chan, ed., *Entry Denied. Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943* (Philadelphia, 1991), p. 94.
[203] 'Polly and Her Pals', *Madison Capital Times*, 6 August 1923.
[204] 'The Bungle Family', *Frederick Daily News,* (various) February 1925.
[205] 'Bringing Up Father', *Lincoln Star,* 26 March 1924; *El Paso Herald*, 24 April 1919; *Daily East Oregonian,* 1 December 1922.

the white mainstream characters they served, but this difference was not posed as any kind of threat. Nor was it used as a means of exploring wider white anxieties over racial privilege in the period. Seemingly, the status of the Chinese as an unthreatening minority ethnic group was well-established by the turn of the century.

Conclusion

In 1901, Frederick Burr Opper, creator of Happy Hooligan, wrote an article discussing caricatures in the earliest comics. He said:

> Colored people and Germans form no small part of the population of Caricature Country. The negroes spend much of their time getting kicked by mules, while the Germans, all of whom have large spectacles and big pipes, fall down a good deal and may be identified by the words "Vass iss", coming out of their mouths. There is also a sprinkling of Chinamen, who are always having their pigtails tied to things, and a few Italians, mostly women, who have wonderful adventures while carrying enormous bundles on their heads. The Hebrew residents of Caricature Country, formerly numerous and amusing, have thinned out of late years – it is hard to say why. This is also true of the Irish dwellers, who at one time formed a large percentage of the population.[1]

This research has demonstrated the evolution of the way that the comics treated black and white ethnic characters over a 35-year period. Some things did change: namely the widespread use of white ethnic stereotyping, which declined after syndication took hold in the 1910s. By contrast, the reliance on black stereotypes remained prevalent into the 1930s, even if there were fewer examples of black characters being subject to physical violence.

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[1] Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: Frederick Burr Opper biographical file, Folder 1, 'Random Readings... Caricature Country', 30 June 1901.

The world created on the comic page should not be misinterpreted as a facsimile of real life in Progressive-Era America. The function of the strips was to create humour out of ideas, behaviours and situations that would be recognisable to an audience who identified with the broader attitudes and messages that the strips used as the basis for their jokes. The relative absence of nativist undertones in the strips does not necessarily prove the same absence of these attitudes in society more widely. However, the way the strips navigated ideas about race and citizenship in this tumultuous period should certainly give us pause. What is very clear is that race as understood in binary black/white, inferior/superior, servant/master terms was a constant in the comics throughout this entire 35 year period. The racial constructs and jokes that were used to consolidate this viewpoint were also very consistent, with no substantial changes in the way that whiteness and blackness were portrayed on the comic page across the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s. The concept of variegated whiteness, however popular among academics and politicians, never really took hold in this medium. Furthermore, while there is evidence of a slightly heightened level of interest in immigration and associated topics leading up to the 1924 Immigration Act, the only sign of concern over the immigrant menace is the overall lack of white ethnic characters in any of the mainstream strips, something which also remained constant over the entire period. Comic artists could, by 1945, congratulate themselves on their 'insistence on good taste in the preparation of comic strip continuity', and the fact that they made 'no unflattering reference to any race or nationality (except "Japs these days")'.[2] However, the process by which these standards came into being actually reflected the triumph of ethnocentrism, the desire to avoid offence ultimately reinforcing the identity of a narrowly-defined white middle-class mainstream from which immigrants, blacks and Asians were ultimately excluded.

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[2] Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: Larry Harris Collection, 18/7 Syndicate Advertising Information, Allen Saunders 'The Comics.... are a serious business', August 1945.

Chapter 4: The comics' impact and cultural legacy

In 1926, a Mrs. Clara Hardesty filed for divorce from her husband Everett. The cause of the breakdown of the couple's marriage was cited by Mrs. Hardesty as her husband's obsession with popular comic strip star Tillie Jones, the title part in Russ Westover's *Tillie the Toiler*. So taken with Westover's fictional flapper was Mr. Hardesty that he wrote her dozens of love letters, some of which were used as evidence in the divorce case.[1] The case of the Hardestys was of course an extreme, and somewhat comical, example of the impact of comic characters on their readers. However, it draws attention to the almost celebrity status of nationally syndicated comic characters like Tillie, and the influence that the strips they appeared in had on the American public. The first chapter of this thesis examined the development of the comic industry and the creation – and popularisation – of the serialised funny. We saw how the early syndicated strips contributed to the nationalisation of American visual culture, a process usually attributed primarily to advertising and early cinema. Having examined in subsequent chapters the way in which the comics dealt with key themes pertaining to gender, race and class identity in the middle section, this final chapter considers the far-ranging social impact of the strips on early twentieth-century America culture.

In their first few decades, the funny papers' influence on American society was widespread. They created and perpetuated cultural tropes on a variety of topics, added words and phrases to the American vernacular and were considered to be a powerful shaper of public opinion. Advertisers and merchandisers took advantage of the comics' unparalleled popularity and

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[1] 'When 'Tillie the Toiler' was Named Co-Respondent', *Anaconda Standard* (21 March 1926).

soon the characters from the funny pages were being used to sell a wide range of consumer products. By the 1930s, they had also inspired radio shows, theater productions and film productions. In less than half a century from their first appearance, the newspaper comic strips had saturated almost every aspect of American culture, leaving a legacy that still persists today.

Idioms & popular concepts/perceptions

The cultural influence of the strips was nowhere more manifest than in their creation of cultural idioms that would, through the strips' national distribution, become embedded in American culture for decades to come. Thomas Kemnitz concluded that joke cartoons perpetuate 'a number of social attitudes and stereotypes, many of them relatively trivial, such as that of the woman driver. They generally do not address themselves to the important social questions but frequently comment upon the mechanics of working out social problems'.[2] In the early twentieth century, comic strips helped to shore up of many of these attitudes and stereotypes. The impact of their treatment of certain topics was noted by many commentators. Several journalists took issue with the way in which the early comics portrayed rural life, with farmers caricatured as 'uncouth and unsophisticated, ready to bite at any shell or gold brick scheme.'[3] The effect of this treatment was considered to be serious: 'Young men and women with pride and ambition want to get away from a profession that is beneath the notice of any other trade and its intelligence held in contempt'.[4] A journalist for *The San Francisco*

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[2] Thomas Milton Kemnitz, 'The Cartoon as a Historical Source', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 4 (Summer 1973), p. 83.
[3] 'Farmers Ridiculed No Longer', *Des Moines Iowa Homestead* (9 November 1911).
[4] Ibid.

Call came to a similar conclusion two years later, writing in 1913 that 'we have our so called "funny" papers and magazines to thank for the general mistaken conception of the American farmer, as they still persist in picturing the rustic rural of carpet bag fame'.[5] Interfering mother-in-laws, workshy telephone operators and the trials of car ownership are a small selection of the other topics cited by commentators as examples of the influence of comic strips in shaping popular opinion and creating cultural (mis)conceptions that permeated popular discourse.[6]

More general references to the role of the funny papers in creating cultural tropes were common in print culture of the era. Phrases like 'the funny papers have told time and again', 'the funny papers have told the thing to death' and 'as any reader of the funny papers will know' were used as precursors to statements about common popular attitudes or occurrences (the three examples above introducing articles on the trials of fatherhood, office boys, and church missionary activity).[7] As Alan Trachtenberg eloquently puts it, cultural tropes are matters of 'prime historical interest', as they are 'vehicles of self-knowledge of the concepts on which people act'. They are also, he argues, forces in their own right, often coloring perceptions in a certain way, even against all evidence.[8] The comic strips created and popularized cultural tropes ranging from the silly to the serious, helping to define people's everyday belief systems and their perceptions of the reality around them.

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[5] 'Aid of Roads by Federal Bureau', *San Francisco Call* (3 August 1913).
[6] Winifred Black, 'Foolish Father', *Indianapolis Sun* (20 April 1908); 'Untitled article', *Lock Haven Express* (16 May 1912); 'Untitled article', *Hutchinson News* (12 November 1910).
[7] 'Advert for Cod Liver Oil', *Lowell Sun* (7 November 1902); 'Passing Throng'; 'On the Trail of the American Missionary', *Iowa Postal Card* (20 February 1908).
[8] Alan Trachtenberg and Eric Foner, *The incorporation of America: culture and society in the gilded age* (New York, 1982), p. 8.

The funnies were also responsible for the creation and popularisation of many words and phrases that would become part of everyday American vocabulary. King Features strip *Barney Google* (debuted in 1919) was credited with the invention of the terms 'heebie-jeebies' and 'time's a wasting'. [9] *Popeye* (debuted in 1929) gave us 'goon' and 'jeep', and *Bringing Up Father* popularised the phrase 'Let George Do It!' [10] In his 1936 work on *The American Language*, H. L. Mencken described the overall contribution of the funnies to the American tongue, saying the comic artist had been 'a very diligent maker of terse and dramatic words... [he] employs many ancients of English speech, e.g. *slam, bang, quack, meow, smash*, and *bump*, but also invents novelties of English speech of his own, e.g. *zowie, bam, socko, yurp, plop, wow, glug, oof, ulk, whap, bing, flooie*, and *grr'*. [11] A later attempt to catalogue the scope of the comics' influence on American speech habits is provided in White and Abel's 'Comic Strips and American Culture'. They attribute Bud Fisher's *Mutt and Jeff* with: 'fall guy', 'inside stuff', 'got his goat', 'piker', and 'tumbling to himself', as well as claiming the title characters inspired the phrase 'the long and short of it'. [12] The influence of Fisher's strip on the nation's language was noted – perhaps misguidedly, given the character's personality – as early as 1913, with an article in *St Helen's Mist* saying that the strip had created a new term ('Mutt') for a good fellow who takes an interest in his fellow man and does his duty towards helping the needy and worthy poor. [13] White and Abel also credited the comics with the creation of the term 'dingbat', which came about in George

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[9] Henry Zorbaugh, 'The Comics... There They Stand', *Journal of Educational Sociology* (1 December 1944).
[10] Ibid.
[11] H. L. Mencken, *American Language* (New York, 2012), p. 184.
[12] Manning Abel and Robert H. David, eds, The Funnies: An American Idiom (New York, 1963), p. 19.
[13] 'Mutts', *St. Helen's Mist* (4 December 1914).

Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, and was later used as the title of the strip *The Dingbat Family*. Other influential artists cited included George McManus, Rube Goldberg, and Billy DeBeck.[14]

There are many other words and phrases that are often cited as originating in the comics but have not been traced to a particular strip. In a radio interview with Stephen Becker, hosted by comic artist Vern Greene, the two discussed the linguistic impact of the comics, citing the terms 'hotdog', 'yardbird' and 'creep' as three major examples.[15] The Abel and White chapter cites these among others (including the insults twerp and drip) as offspring of the comics. In their words, 'They are colourful and unique in and of themselves, and the fact that they were transmuted from the mouths of comic strip characters to the minds of a living populace is part of the accomplishment of the comic strip tradition'.[16]

Comics as shapers of public opinion

The role of the comics as influencers of public opinion was not lost on commentators, with artists often contacted by business people and public officials requesting certain treatment of a product or topic of interest to them. During the strip's first decade, *Abie the Agent* creator Harry Hershfield recalled being asked by a prominent member of the American Jewish community, philanthropist and businessman Nathan Strauss, to create advertising material (he used the term 'propaganda') for a Jewish charitable drive. Strauss told Hershfield that 'the mention of this charitable cause through a medium that was so largely read by the Gentile as well as the Jew, would do more good than any other form of publicity that they could have.'[17]

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[14] Abel and White, *The Funnies*, p. 19.
[15] Greene and Becker, 'National Cartoonist Society Interviews'.
[16] Abel and White, *The Funnies*, p. 19.
[17] 'An Exclusive Interview for The Jewish Monitor From Harry Hershfield, Creator of 'Abie The Agent'', *The Jewish Monitor* (3 June 1921).

In the same interview, Hershfield also revealed that throughout the course of World War I, the War Department in Washington 'was in continual communication with me, by letter, to help with propaganda through my series to make suggestions for the sale of Liberty Bonds, and for the winning of the war.' At the conclusion of the conflict, Hershfield received a letter from Secretary of War Baker's office, thanking *Abie, the Agent* for doing its share in helping in the winning of the war.[18] Much later, Roy Crane, who first gained fame in the early 1930s for his strip *Wash Tubbs* but was best known for his military strip *Buzz Sawyer,* was approached by the State Department, who called upon Crane's syndicate representative with a story they wanted Crane to feature, which would be 'helpful to the United States and which would still make a rattling adventure'.[19] A decade later, in 1961, Crane was again asked to put a political message in his comic about the situation in the Far East. He did so, viewing this as an act of public service, but noted that he lost a few papers because of it, because they wished to express their political opinions on their editorial pages, and not in the comic supplement.[20]

The impact of the actions of comic characters upon their readers was wide-ranging, with the funny papers possessing the ability to shape behaviour, influence tastes and fashions and sell goods. On occasion, the effects were sobering: Crane recalled how a boy in Toledo lost the sight in one eye in an accident caused indirectly by one of his strips – although he did not detail how this event came about.[21] In a draft autobiographical sketch included in a collection of Crane's personal and professional papers, he discussed the comics' influence:

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center: Roy Crane Papers, Box 4, Folder 1, 'Erich Brandeis to Roy Crane', 6 January 1944.

[20] Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center: Roy Crane Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, Roy Crane 'Autobiographical Sketch', undated.

[21] Ibid.

One has only to put into a comic strip character's mouth the words, 'I don't like

spinach', and it may influence certain people. Even what they don't do can be an

influence. I've had letters from the Hat Wearers Association complaining that I didn't

draw people wearing hats, complaining that it was not conducive to cause people to

buy hats. Everything that a comic character does or says makes a certain impact upon

the public, especially the young.[22]

As acknowledged by Crane, Popeye's role in popularising spinach was well-known and has

been documented on many occasions; the citizens of Crystal City (the 'spinach capital' of

Texas) erected a monument to the muscular sailor in 1937 that survives to this day.[23] He

was, however, not the only comic character whose actions on the page influenced market

behaviours. In the first few years of *Mutt and Jeff*, Bud Fisher depicted the title character

betting on real horse races due to take place over the coming days. The choices Mutt made on

the comics page were known to affect the odds offered on those races in real life.[24] The

women of the comic page were known to both reflect and influence the latest fashions.[25] The

home interiors choices of *Gasoline Alley's* Wallet family were believed to have inspired a

fashion among teenagers for buying reading lamps.[26] And, in 1920, an article in the *Great

Falls Faily Tribune* described the way in which Jiggs' eating habits in *Bringing Up Father*

affected the price of cabbage. The cabbage merchant interviewed suggested that the recent 33

percent increase in cabbage prices was largely down to Jiggs' fondness for corned beef and

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[22] Ibid
[23] Henry Zorbaugh, 'The Comics... There They Stand', *Journal of Educational Sociology* (1 December 1944).
[24] 'Bud Fisher - Regular Guy', *Topeka Daily State Journal* (14 August 1915).
[25] 'True Story of the Evening Sun's Thomas Duff, Esq., Proves that Comic Characters are Made Not Born', *Hanover Evening Sun* (8 March 1917).
[26] Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: Frank King autobiographical file, Folder 2, 'Syndicate Sentences', 6 June 1964.

cabbage, noting that a rush on cabbage would usually follow the day after he was depicted

enjoying his favourite meal on the funny pages.[27] In a similar example, when 1930s comic

strip character Joe Palooka was revealed to be a big fan of cheese, sales of the product rose so

impressively that the National Cheese Institute crowned Palooka's creator, the amusingly

named Ham Fisher, the 'Cheese King of 1937'.[28]

The role of comic strips in popularising consumer products was threefold. First, as in the

examples above, a character's actions, tastes or behaviours could influence the popularity of

products or activities in a general sense. Popeye's liking for spinach or Jiggs' for cabbage

likely created an increased desire among newspaper readers to eat the foods themselves, and

the association of the characters with the products increased their cultural cache and general

desirability. Second, characters were used in advertisements for specific companies and

products. Sometimes these products related directly to the character's actions on the page:

Jiggs acted as the face of companies selling his beloved corned beef and cabbage on more

than one occasion.[29] Comic characters were also used to advertise products and businesses to

which they had no obvious connection. Mike and Ike (of strip *Mike and Ike: They Look Alike*)

became the face of clothing store Crutcher and Starks in 1920, who integrated the boys'

status as identical twins with their own branding as a store providing individualised clothes

and standardized values (see figure 51 below).

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[27] 'Who Raised Price of Cabbage? George McManus and Mr Jiggs', *Great Falls Daily Tribune* (4 April 1920).
[28] Abel and White, *The Funnies*, p. 21.
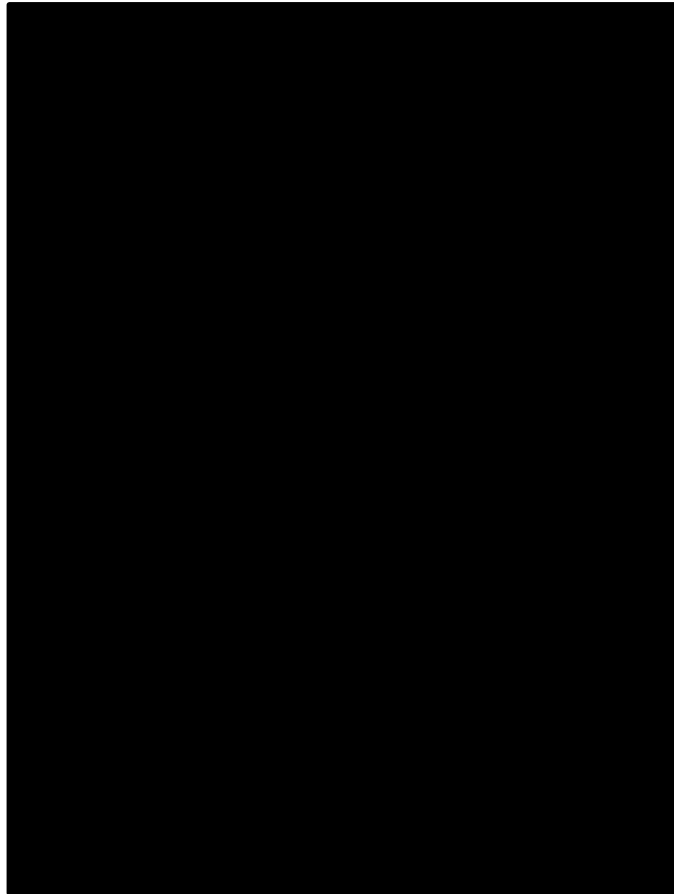[29] 'Safeway's Advert', *The San Francisco Examiner* (17 March 1938).

Figure 51: Advertisement printed in *Richmond Daily Register*, 3 November 1920.

Similarly, in 1924, Andy Gump appeared in an advert for Rochester Savings Bank. The

advert featured a single panel from a recent instalment of the strip, in which Andy declares

his intention to put a recent windfall in the bank, rather than run the risk of losing it (again) to

fake promoters and moneymaking schemes. The bank lauded Andy's approach to saving, and

'recommend[s] his philosophy to anyone considering an investment', providing details of the

'gilt-edge security' they were able to provide.[30]

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[30] Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: Sidney Smith biographical file, Folder 1, 'Advert for Rochester Savings Bank', 28 June 1924.

Despite their increasing popularity, the effectiveness of such adverts was often questioned. In 1911, the Advertising Manager at the C. E. Zimmerman Company lamented the use of comic pictures in advertising, saying that he felt they ultimately did more harm than good. It was his belief that readers laughed at the advert rather than taking it seriously, rarely buying the product advertised as a result.[31] However, whatever reservations may have been felt among critics, the use of comics in advertisements would become widespread by the 1920s. The ability of the cartoon format to communicate complicated ideas and arguments in an understandable and accessible format ultimately made them an invaluable marketing tool. Indeed, in 1919 the Dakota Budget Board made the papers due to its decision to use a reproduction of a *Doings of the Duffs* strip as an illustration of why their budget had increased by half a million dollars. In an interview, the Dakota State Auditor explained that 'We might devote a page of close print to explanations and not get our position over so clearly as we can do through this cartoon'.[32]

Merchandising

The third way in which comics were used to sell consumer good was through the explicit licensing of characters and subsequent creation of comic character merchandise. In 1904, Richard Outcault attended the St Louis World's Fair with the express intention of marketing the title character of his popular children's strip *Buster Brown*. The Sunday strip had first appeared in 1902 in the *New York Herald*, and featured a middle-class boy who tended towards mischief, but learnt important lessons from his mistakes each week.[33] By licensing

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[31] 'Business Building', *Barton County Democrat* (25 August 1911).
[32] 'Dakota Budget Totals Exactly $4,681,396.06', *Bismarck Tribune* (21 January 1919).
[33] Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945*, p. 44.

the character and then selling the rights of use to various manufacturers during the fair, Outcault kicked off an 'explosion of Buster merchandise available in stores'.[34] Ian Gordon, in his seminal *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture,* uses Buster Brown as a worked example of 'the amalgam of interests, and techniques, that extended comics' Modernist vision to the nation.'[35] Gordon writes that Outcault, who created Buster Brown after he had failed to ensure copyright protection of the 'Yellow Kid' character that originally brought him fame, had always intended to license Buster's likeness to other products, and had created him accordingly.[36] Outcault designed Buster as a visual type that strongly resonated with readers, his physical appearance and clothing closely resembling the Victorian representation of the innocent child personified in Little Lord Fauntleroy.[37] The character was an ideal vehicle to market children's products. By December of that year, the term 'Buster Brown' had become synonymous with children's suits, with an advert for the bi-annual sale at clothing store Hart Schaffner and Marx declaring that they had 'placed our entire juvenile department in this sale, embracing all the new productions. Buster Browns, Sailors, Military, Norfolks, 2 and 3 Piece Suits, Hats, Caps, Shoes, Waists – all new and fresh'.[38]

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[34] Tim Hollis, *Toons in Toyland: The Story of Cartoon Character Merchandise* (Oxford, Miss, 2015).
[35] Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945*, p. 43.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] 'The Boston's Great Semi-Annual Clearance Sale is Now On', *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, 20 August, 1904.
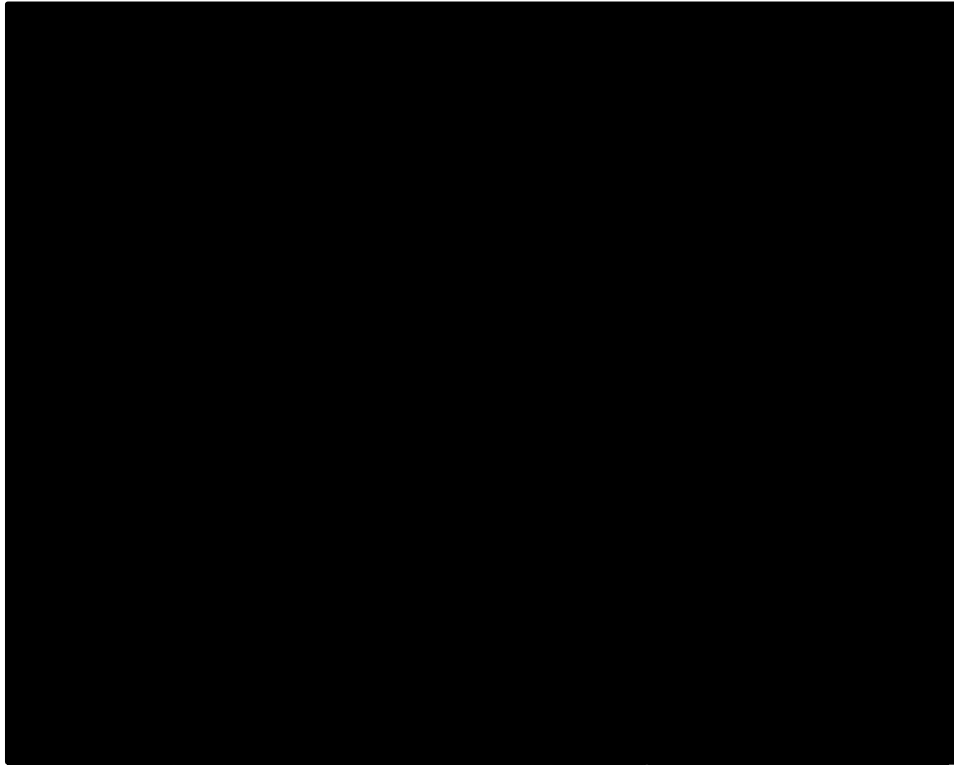
Figure 52: Tillie the Toiler Jigsaw Puzzle, 1933. Copyright King Features Syndicate. Image provided by Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum.
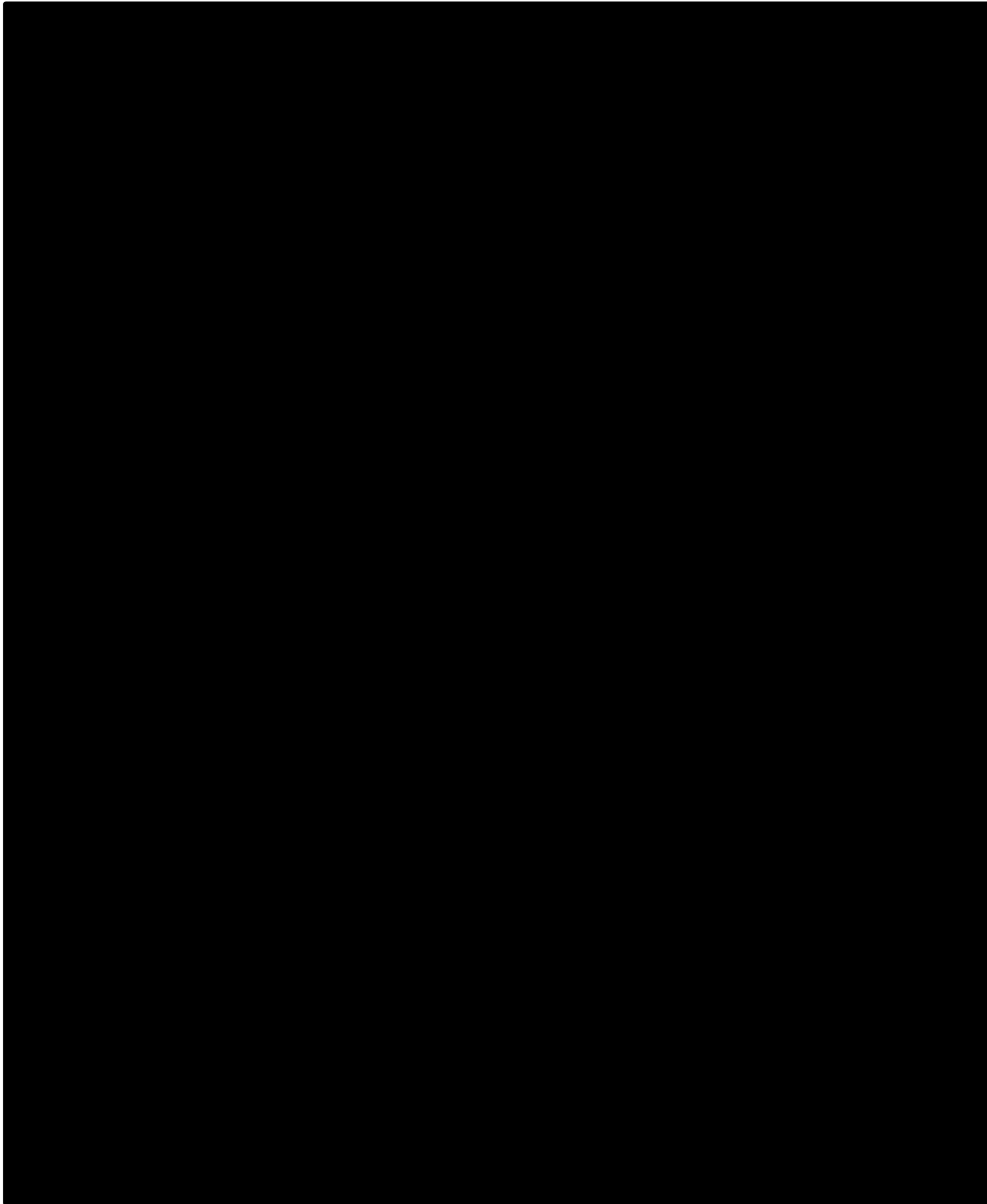
Figure 53: Advert for a Buster Brown Party Game, c. 1913. Image provided by Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum.
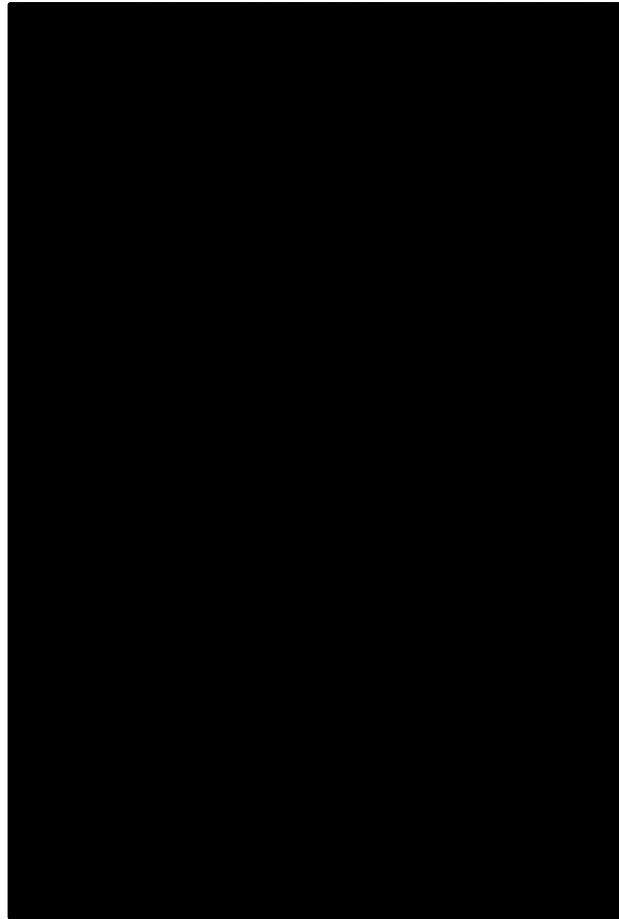
Figure 54: Advertisement for Andy Gump biscuits, *Washington Evening Star,* 7 September 1928.

In the decades that followed, comic merchandising became big business, with no corner of

the market untapped. Comic characters found form in all kinds of products, from games,

puzzles and toys featuring Maggie and Jiggs and Skeezix, to Gump biscuits, to Tillie the

Toiler house dresses.[39] Until the production of film-based Disney merchandise in the 1930s,

newspaper comic strips remained the biggest source of characters for licensed merchandise,

producing toys, clothes and consumables desired by adults and children alike.[40] The

relationship was reciprocal, with the appeal of the recognizable characters of the comic

[39] Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945*; Hollis, *Toons in Toyland* The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum also hold many examples of promotional material for such items, as well as photographs of memorabilia and comic-inspired products.
[40] Hollis, *Toons in Toyland*.

screen responsible for the extended market presence of the consumer goods, while at the same time the expansion of the comic character into consumer products reminded readers of their favourite strips.[41] As a result of this cross-promotion, comic characters like Jiggs and Maggie, the Katzenjammer Kids and Buster Brown became more than just fictional friends: they became brands in their own right.

The stage and screen: expansion into other cultural media

The use of comic characters was not limited to the production and marketing of consumer goods. Comic strips were also used as the basis for radio shows, songs, stage performances and movies. One of the earliest examples of such adaptations came again from Outcault's shrewd licensing of the Buster Brown character who, as well as selling shoes and suits, also starred in a musical play in 1903. The 'elaborate' and 'spectacular' performance engaged at least 60 people, including a chorus, a ballet and a 'liberal number of show girls'.[42] A review of the show praised it for staying true to its model – the newspaper sketches – and casting well known actors to play both Buster and his canine sidekick Tige.[43] Because of his proactive licensing of the character, Ian Gordon estimates that Outcault had earnt nearly $44,000 in royalties from the stage show by 1907.[44] This differed from Outcault's earlier experience with The Yellow Kid, as in that instance he had copyrighted the character only after the Yellow Kid craze had already developed. However, Buster was actually not the first comic character to provide inspiration for the stage. Frederick-Burr Opper's Happy Hooligan

[41] Avi Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet: The Lone Ranger and Transmedia Brand Licensing* (Austin, TX, 2015), p. 26.
[42] 'Coming to Theaters', *Washington Times* (14 January 1904).
[43] Ibid.
[44] Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945*, p. 47.

character had been featuring in stage productions since at least 1902, just two years after the strip's first appearance in the *New York World*.[45] The show (or one similar) was first advertised in the *Washington Times*, but by the end of the year it had made its way to towns in both Indiana and Minnesota. In 1904 a 40-strong theater company brought a version to Omaha, Nebraska, with the local paper boasting of the 'new and most expensive nature' of the scenery and costumes.[46] In 1906, a new and up-to-date version of the 'popular and successful' farce comedy entitled 'Happy Hooligan's Trip around the World' came to theaters in Kentucky.[47] Dozens of other shows based on popular strips followed, with stage versions of *Bringing Up Father*, *Abie the Agent*, *Mutt and Jeff*, *The Gumps* and *Tillie the Toiler* all achieving national success.
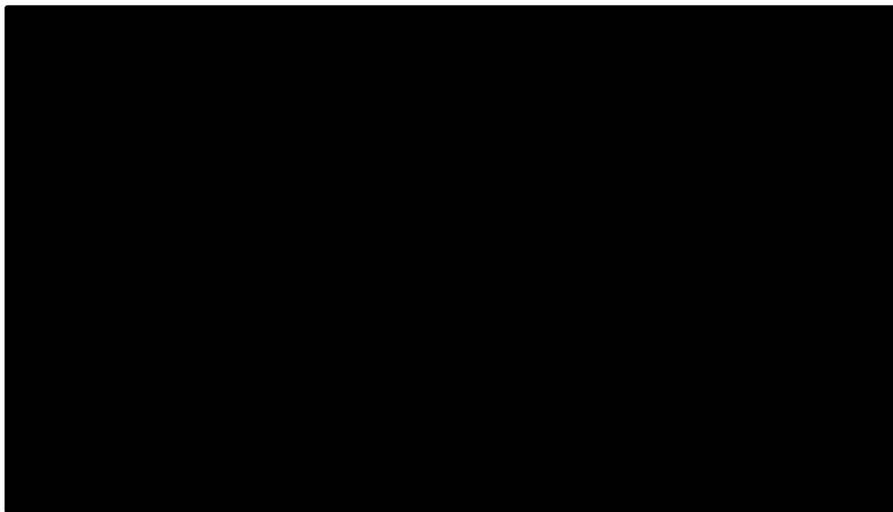
Figure 55: Advert published in *Warren Evening Mirror,* 13 December 1918.

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[45] 'Academy - This Week', *Washington Times* (23 April 1902), An earlier reference to 'Happy Hooligan' can be found in the vaudeville column of Der Deutsche Correspondent, 30th November 1901. However, it is likely that this reference in fact related to Fred Lowe, an acrobat and vaudeville performer who performed under the moniker 'the Original Happy Hooligan', and claimed to the inspiration for an alternative version of the character, produced by an ultimately unsuccessful New York cartoonist who was eventually committed to a mental hospital in 1906. In a 2018 article for the Minnesota Historical Society, Jennifer Huebscher explores the possibility that Bradleys unfortunate fate was as the result of his creation being poached by Outcault, who then went on to achieve considerable fame:'http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHistoryMagazine/articles/66/v66i03p112-117.pdf'.
[46] 'Announcements of the Theaters', *Omaha Daily Bee* (17 March 1904).
[47] 'Theatrical Notes', *The Paducah Evening Sun* (26 September 1906).

Comic characters also played an important role in the development of early American cinema. In 1903, the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company produced a short film entitled 'Happy Hooligan interferes'. The film (which is available to download via the Library of Congress website) shows Happy – who is very clearly the Happy of the comic strip – watching an Organ Grinder, who is playing underneath a window. A woman appears in the window and gestures at the organ grinder to move. Happy encourages the Organ Grinder to keep playing, until he spots a policeman and runs away. Happy starts trying to speak to the policeman but as he does so, the lady from the window reappears with a bucket of water to throw at the organ grinder. It of course soaks the policeman, who blames Happy and, as per his usual comic strip fate, carries him off to jail.[48] The year before, the same company had also made a series of seven films featuring comic strip characters 'Foxy Grandpa and the Boys'.[49] These films played a part in the evolution of the motion picture industry which, between 1900 and 1906, moved from rather primitive, single-scene film productions to longer and more complicated ones.[50] Their inclusion, so swiftly after the comics themselves debuted, demonstrates the speed with which comic characters became an influential part of the American cultural landscape even in the earliest days of syndication. As movies became big business, the funny pages provided obvious material, with motion pictures based on the strips released on a regular basis. The recognisable and popular characters of the newspaper comic supplement were staples of the big screen long before the comic books superheroes of the 1930s and 1940s dominated Hollywood.

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[48] The film can be downloaded from: https://www.loc.gov/item/96521795/ [accessed 24 January 2019]

[49] Paul C. Spehr, 'Filmmaking at the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company 1900—1906', *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, 37 (1980), p. 416.

[50] Spehr, 'Filmmaking at the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company 1900—1906', p. 420.

It is clear from the documented examples of their far-reaching influence that a large proportion of the American people embraced them as a cultural product, and did so with considerable enthusiasm. For Patricia Bradley, such embrace of a cultural product 'was in some sense the embrace of the national values with which it was associated'.[51] I would cautiously agree with Bradley's assertion, although a lack of source material means that it is impossible to determine exactly how far the characters and stories of the newspaper comic strip influenced or reflected the way that ordinary Americans thought about 'big' contemporary issues around class, race and identity. What we can say for certain is that the comics' popularity was such that they influenced the way Americans spoke and what they bought, and played a part in the construction and perpetuation of enduring cultural tropes. Their extraordinary growth, broad appeal and adaptation into other formats also demonstrate the wider popularisation of American culture during this period, a process to which they made a significant contribution.

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[51] P. Bradley, *Making American Culture: A Social History, 1900–1920* (New York, 2009), p. ix.

Conclusion

In 1928, Arthur W. Crawford, the Manager of the *Chicago Tribune Newspapers Syndicate* summarised a recent debate over the difference between the humour of one of the first 'funnies' published in the 1890s, and a contemporary *Harold Teen* strip. The former, he explained, was a practical joke, whereas the latter is 'Main Street'. His conclusion on the subject was that 'the great idea once was laughing at others. Now it is laughing at ourselves'.[1] This thesis has examined the development of the comics industry from the early gag strips through the introduction of the 'everyday' strips that, in Crawford's words, turned jokes inwards, finding humour in the details of mainstream American life (as defined by the creators of the comics). It looks at the way that national syndication created a mass cultural product that was perceived by contemporaries and comics historians as largely inclusive, appealing to Americans from vastly different backgrounds. Syndication had clear effects on not just the mechanics of the comics industry, but also on the subject matter of the strips. Their definition and treatment of both 'Main Street' and 'others' over the course of the period defined the remit of chapters two and three of this thesis and demonstrated the role the comics played in consolidating the idea of white middle-class normativity in the Progressive Era.

Research objectives

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[1] Arthur Crawford, 'At Last, At Last! Arthur Crawford Talks for Publication About Tribune Comics', *The Tribune* (April 1928).

When I first put together the proposal for this research, the focus was considerably narrower. I had always intended to focus primarily on the depiction of whiteness – and specifically white ethnicity – in a selection of the comics in the period. The questions I wished to answer were:

- How did the strips differentiate between white Americans, the white immigrant 'other' and blacks? To what extent was identity construction race-based on a sliding scale of whiteness, as opposed to nation/origin-based and how did these characteristics relate to each other?

- How did the portrayal of immigrant groups and immigrant life compare to other forms of popular culture like vaudeville, literature and film?

- How did the strips respond to the political discourse on ethnicity, immigration and citizenship that resulted in the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act? What do they add to our understanding of the pervasiveness of nativist ideas in American society?

- How did those strips by artists of immigrant background compare to those created by non-immigrants?

I also wanted to look at contemporary commentary surrounding the strips, examining how race representation in the strips was regarded by their readers.

As the research progressed, its remit widened. Within a few months, it became clear that the comics were part of a bigger story of the growth of mass culture in America, and the impact that had on understandings of identity, social hierarchy and national character in the period. I decided to divide my thesis into three broad areas: production, content and impact/reception, in order to more fully understand the part played by the comics in the cultural developments of the period.

Summary of findings

The syndicated humour comic in American newspapers played a central part in the wider story of the consolidation of American mass culture in this period, despite being largely overlooked by historians. The strips evolved in the earliest years of the industry, increasingly aiming to bring together Americans from a range of social backgrounds. With the rise of syndication came efforts to avoid offending or alienating any significant sectors of the comics' readership. In their treatment of race in particular, comic artists had to be mindful of the sensibilities of both black readers and white ones. As a result, they inadvertently created a sense of a common ground centred on cultural conceptions of a white middle class. The explosion of national syndication in the 1910s – as documented in chapter one – resulted in the same strips being read by Americans across geographical and demographic divides, meaning that the way they used humour to draw social boundaries had profound and wide-ranging consequences.

Analysis of the content of the comics in this study revealed a number of commonalities. As the industry matured and became more regulated, a push towards respectability and inclusivity resulted in race being presented as a distinction between a white middle class and black servant/service class. While obvious racism (by the period's standards) was actively discouraged in the strips, the socially subservient position of black characters, and particularly black men, was used as a means of shoring up the racial superiority of the white mainstream, meaning that the comics ultimately reinforced society's division into 'white' and 'other'. The ambiguity of white ethnics, so central to the era's political and academic discourse, was largely left off the comic page. Identifiable immigrant characters were almost exclusively contained to their own strips. These strips explored the challenges facing

immigrants seeking to make a place in the American mainstream, but did not cast the process of assimilation in a racial framework. In these comics, just like the rest of those in the study, the focus is on the characters' acquisition of social status and their membership of a middle class that is white by definition. The process of Americanisation enabled white ethnics to become part of the mainstream, from which African-Americans were actively excluded. This distinction is important: European immigrants benefited from the inherent value of their whiteness as property, whereas black Americans were treated as fundamentally different and inferior. There was no process by which African Americans could acculturate into the white-dominated mainstream.

With the 'problem' of race largely absent from the comic page, the strips focused on questions of social hierarchy, in particular the definition and experiences of what Arthur Crawford termed 'Main Street'. The picture they portrayed is reminiscent of what Roland Marchand described as a 'zerrspiegel' – a distorted reflection of social reality. For Marchand, the distorted reality of advertising images represented the efforts of advertisers to 'respond to consumers' desires for fantasy and wish-fulfillment' and create an 'image of literal reality' of 'life as it ought to be'.[2] Their motivations were uncomplicated – it made sense to present a 'middle-class' lifestyle as the norm as it encouraged buyers from all walks of life to – quite literally – buy into consumerism as a vehicle of social advancement.

In the comics, the picture was similar. The dislocation of employment and earning from social status meant that consumer behaviour was the most obvious indicator of membership of the middle class. The fact that such behaviour was not overly limited by a lack of funds

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[2] Roland Marchand, Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920 - 1940 (Berkeley, 1985), p. xvii.

only served to reinforce this message; that the vast majority of the (white) population

belonged to this social group, with a 'rich' minority above and a poor minority below. As

such, at a basic level the comics perpetuated the 'national mythology of the Everyman', in

which mainstream America is made up of a largely equal white middle-class majority.[3]

However, the strips did not simply portray a one-dimensional celebration of a triumphant

middle-class mainstream, or uncritically accept or reproduce the values associated with that

triumph. Indeed, comic artists often used satire to challenge and undermine the self-aware

behaviours of an insecure and avaricious middle class. The idea of the American Dream also

received complicated treatment, as the comics parodied the integrity of the 'inclusive'

mainstream they depicted. Status anxiety was a constant theme, with characters' fears of

downwards movement ever-present. The desperate desire to 'keep up with the Joneses' often

saw comic characters exposed, questioning the stability of their social rank and whether they

really belonged, or if lack of cultural capital or an inherent set of personality traits marked

them out as imposters. As such, the strips demonstrate the multiple uses of popular culture to

at once unite and divide, and to undermine as well as shore up dominant ideologies.

Contribution

This thesis offers several contributions to the historiography of both the comic industry and

the Progressive era. The analysis in chapter one unequivocally demonstrates the geographical

distribution of the early strips, showing how the same material appeared in small towns and

big cities across the country. This is an extension of previous work that has been done by Ian

Gordon, upon whose efforts to demonstrate the rapid inclusion of comic supplements in

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[3] Samuel, *The American Middle Class*, p. 5.

newspapers I sought to build. Using a mixture of contemporary sources I have also proven the extent and speed of the strips' impact on American culture, something that is laid out in chapter four. As such this thesis provides a compelling case for the definition of the comics as mass culture, in the years before even Hollywood movies and national advertisements could reach such broad and diverse audiences.

Time spent at the archives of Syracuse University and the Billy Ireland Cartoon Museum and Library also facilitated the construction of a much fuller picture of the development of the syndication process and the evolution of the early comics industry than has previously been possible. In particular, it has been possible to detail rates of pay, the process of comic production and the complex dynamics of audiences, editors, syndicates and comic artists. These dynamics led to the imposition of a set of 'taboos' that informed the way that the strips dealt with a whole host of topics and would, inadvertently, determine the treatment of race on the comics page for decades.

The analysis of the strips' content adds to the growing interest among comics historians on how the strips depicted American life, and the size of my source base is considerably larger than any other study. Mine is also one of the only studies of the comics to take a comparative approach to more than one or two strips. My findings demonstrate how understandings of normative categories are constructed, and highlight the role of popular culture in informing, perpetuating and challenging these understandings. In this regard, I consider my work in-keeping with recent work on the construction of whiteness, which focuses on how whiteness and otherness are constructed in oppositional terms.[4] It also helps to fill one gap in our

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[4] Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York, 2010).

understanding of the history of American nativism: how academic concepts were translated into popular discourse.

Limitations and areas of opportunity

There were questions posed that it was not possible to answer. The main area that could be developed further is readership and reception. I had hoped to find memoirs and personal accounts of the role the strips had in providing cultural cues to newly arrived immigrants, or in the very least, information on the demographics of the comics' audience. Such information, sadly, did not materialise. I was not able to add much to the basic academic consensus that the very first comics introduced by Hearst and Pulitzer were aimed at attracting a large urban, working-class readership made up in large part of newly arrived immigrants.[5] As discussed in chapter one, it was also not possible to find any data pertaining to whether any sizeable proportion of black Americans read the strips, or how they felt about them. Therefore, while this research suggests that the comics broke down social barriers of class, gender, age and geography, the extent to which they brought together Americans of different racial or ethnic backgrounds remains unknown.

Furthermore, the lack of archival data on early comic readership more generally limited the analysis of the topic of reception. The first Gallup poll on the comics was not carried out until 1931 and – while its results are briefly mentioned in Roland Marchand's *Advertising the American Dream* – I have not been able to track down the original report, or any

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[5] Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016), p. 11.

contemporary discussion of its findings.[6] As a result, I have had to base my conclusions on the way that people read, understood and interpreted the comics on the evidence of their popularity and anecdotal references to their impact. I cannot prove how far comics' portrayal of mainstream American life affected the way that their readers defined their place within it, or reflected popular opinion. Any conclusions on the matter are necessarily therefore based on drawing inferences from a number of different areas discussed throughout the thesis, in particular contemporary writing on the strips' impact on language, behaviour and public opinion (chapter 3) and the theoretical understanding of the role of popular culture in creating social discourse. Contemporaries wrote about how strongly the comics' portrayal of everyday life resonated with readers, arguing that they 'deserve the serious consideration of the statesmen and educators, politicians and publicists, psychologists and sociologists, for they reflect what millions are thinking about, what they want, what they fear, and how they feel about matters of social significance'.[7] Lastly, the audience's repeated daily exposure to the comics and the messages they contained – which were themselves repetitive in terms of themes over time and thematic messages over different strips – strongly indicates but cannot prove the strips' power as a social influencer.

Strengthening this area of the thesis represents the most obvious area for future research, and may be achievable with access to different archives and the increasing digitisation of searchable archival material across the world. There are three specific collections that may include material pertinent to the operations of the comics syndicates and enable further

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[6] Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, p. 110.
[7] Syracuse University Library, Special Collections Research Center: Roy Crane Papers, Box 11, Folder 4, Sidonic Gruenberg, 'The Comics as a Social Force', December 1944.

development of the findings in chapter one.[8] One is the business papers of William Randolph Hearst, the creator of Hearst Features syndicate, which concern the editorial management of his newspapers, magazines, and related companies. The second is a collection of the papers of publisher John Francis Neylan, which detail his handling of Hearst's business affairs. The third collection contains the letters to author and biographer Albert Bigelow Paine, which are described as providing an overview of the newspaper industry of the time.

This study focused on a dozen comics, the analysis of which provided an enormous database of over 26,000 entries – one for each separate daily strip. I had originally planned to include a larger number of comics (around 20) in my study, but quickly realised that this would provide an unwieldy mass of material from which it might be difficult to draw meaningful comparisons. Chapters two and three of this thesis draw on material from only a small proportion of the database that I compiled, limited to the themes of social and racial discourse. There is ample opportunity to carry out research projects on a huge number of topics based on my content database (which I intend to make available online).[9] These could then be supplemented by the study of other strips that are not included in this research. The examination of other strips would also be an interesting way to expand on the findings of this study.

Afterword: from funny papers to adventure comics

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[8] All three collections are housed at the University of Berkeley in California. I carried out a research trip to the States but prioritised the archives at the Billy Ireland Museum and Library in Columbus Ohio. Sadly due to financial and time constraints I was not able to extend my trip to California.

[9] There were a few topics that stood out to me as ripe for investigating further, but which did not seem to fit within the already ambitious remit of my research. These were the depiction of mental health, international travel and the American tourist, and the portrayal of the exotic.

The golden era of the funny papers was over almost as quickly as it began. A few action strips (most notably *Wash Tubbs* which was started by Roy Crane in 1924) had entered the market in the 1920s, but the 1930s would see a period of great upheaval in the comics industry, as the success of titles like *Tarzan* and *Buck Rogers* convinced syndicates that the new adventure comics were the future of the genre.[10] Though the most popular funnies survived, these adventure strips would go on to dominate both newspaper comic supplements and the new comic book collections that first emerged in 1933.[11] The adventure comics were a product of their time. The superhero craze of the 1930s and 1940s was in part a reaction to the contemporary issues facing wartime America, fulfilling a social need to explore questions around power, sovereignty and the triumph of good over evil.[12]

Just like the adventure strips, the twelve comics examined in this thesis functioned as creative spaces, in which the ideas about social status, race and national identity that defined the Progressive period were explored, dissected and at times openly mocked. But the comics' impact on American life did not come to an end with the shift in the industry: their influence was wide-reaching and their legacy long-lasting. They influenced popular discourse about a number of topics, creating cultural idioms that were accepted widely and proved difficult to shift. They also popularised the genre everyday humour – something which would go on to become central to American popular culture in the era of television and the much-loved situation comedy. They contributed to the development of language, inspiring words and phrases still used today. Finally, they created characters who became American cultural icons, and whose notoriety helped to sell consumer goods and inspired spin-offs on the stage,

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[10] Pierre Coupiere and Maurice C. Horn, *A History of the Comic Strip* (New York, 1968), p. 57.
[11] Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia, 2009), p. 18.
[12] Christopher Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed?: Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda in America During World War II* (New York, 2011).

in songs and on the big screen. The funny papers of the Progressive era have, in the words of Representative Robert G. Houston, 'long ceased to be mere comics; they are an institution, and a real part of American life'.[13]

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[13] Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum: George McManus biographical file, Oversize, Pamphlet: '20 Years of Jiggs and Maggie', 1933, p. 20.

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