

Shel Dorf's COMIC CLIPS

The Life and Times of a Comics Collector



Can you remember when the collecting bug first bit you? Think back a little...

For some of you, it might have been as "recent" as *Fantastic Four* 1, in 1961, which really started an epidemic of collectitis. For others, it might have been the golden age of "Superman" and "Batman," or the beautiful full-page "Prince Valiant," "Tarzan," and "Flash Gordon" newspaper strips. Perhaps some of you are just cutting your teeth on the new Jack Kirby titles. One thing is certain, however—when the bug bites, the resulting condition has been known to last for years.

Some people, like yours truly, never recover. We often become carriers of the disease and infect our friends and acquaintances. A fellow I know was courting a girl, and popped the question after he learned she kept a scrapbook of "Peanuts" strips. Some collectors grow up to be professionals themselves, and are in turn collected by others. A comics convention is a collection of collectors collectively collecting for their collections. So you see the ridiculous lengths to which this thing can go. Still, to be smitten is downright ecstasy.

Not too much has been written about collectors themselves, but I've had some very pleasant evenings with fans hearing about how they started. Since this column is a free-form kind of thing, I thought it might be fun to tell you how it happened to me.

Very often an early denial of

something is the motivating force behind collecting. For me it was a hardcover book of "The Katzenjammer Kids."

I was about seven-years-old and had been deposited at my cousin's house while our mothers went on their usual Saturday afternoon shopping spree. I found the book on a dusty shelf and started to flip through it. The cover was torn off and it was pretty beat up, but I had never seen anything like it before and the cartoon drawings delighted me. I sat there all afternoon reading it over and over. The devilish pranks of Hans and Fritz made me laugh out loud. I immersed myself in this world of fantasy, and identified easily (being a holy terror myself at times) with the Kids. I can remember detesting that brat Rollo, and the tattle-tale little girl who got the boys in trouble. An incident involving a hornet's nest placed in Mamma's bustle comes to mind these many years later. There were also a few pages of "Hawkshaw the Detective."

The following Saturday I was again deposited at my cousin's house and immediately searched for the book. I couldn't find it and to my horror learned that in a house-cleaning project a few days earlier it had been thrown out. I felt terrible, especially after my cousin said, "If we'd known you liked that book so much, we'd have given it to you." This first exposure to comics thrilled me more than anything I'd ever seen, and to lose it so soon must have really upset me. My father took me to the dime store that

night to search for it. It was an old book, long out of print, so we never did find it. Instead of the book, he bought me a "Magic Copyfun" set. Do you remember those things? They were very popular in the '40s. The set consisted of several waxed paper sheets, a stick, and a booklet with pages of cartoon eyes, noses, mouths, ears, hair, and funny bodies. By placing a waxed sheet over the feature you selected and rubbing over the top with the stick, you could transfer the image to the paper and create your own cartoons. On the way home, Dad bought a Sunday paper different from the one we usually got, and there in the colored funnies was a page of my dear "Katzenjammer Kids."

From that point on the comic section was a very important part of my life. I took the Copyfun sheets and rubbed off pictures of the Kids and made a little booklet which I saved. That was a poor substitute for the book, but it was *something*. It seems odd that I didn't just save the whole page, but I didn't think of that until a few years later. The paper we took didn't carry the Katzies, but there were others that became my passion. I fell in love with that beautiful blonde pilot, Flyin' Jenny, hated Ace Hanlon when he made trouble for Red Ryder and Little Beaver, laughed at the antics of Mutt & Jeff, Li'l Abner, Reg'lar Fellers, and Big Chief Wahoo, and thrilled at the adventures of Tarzan, Stoney Craig, Captain Easy, and my favorite, Superman.

One week as I opened the paper, a little comics booklet fell out. It contained complete stories, the first of which told about a man who was shot and left for dead, but recovered to adopt a new identity as a crime-fighter. He wore a little domino mask and made his hideout in a place called Wildwood Cemetery. Seeing him rise out of a grave at night he indeed looked like the name he took for himself, "The Spirit." Another story in the book told the adventures of an early liberated fem called "Lady Luck." She, too, fought crime. She had long blonde hair, and dressed entirely in green. (Picture this crime-fighting lady of fashion: Flat, wide-brimmed green hat, green veil, a flowing green cape over a green dress, long green gloves, and high-heeled green pumps.)

I thought at first someone had made a mistake including this booklet in the paper, but it became a weekly feature and I began to collect them. Around this time I discovered comic books and hung out at the corner confectionary store to read them off the racks. ("Hey you kids, if you're not going to buy, then put them books down!") I remember the thrill of seeing an entire comic book of "Superman" and remember running home to ask my dad for fifteen cents to buy *World's Fair Comics* (a giant volume with thick cardboard covers). Of course, the answer was, "No." The big thing then was a penny for a Tootsie Roll.

When I began to get an allowance, all of it went to buy comic books. My favorites of that era were: *Superman*, *Batman*, *King Comics*, *Captain America*, *Blue Beetle*, *Green Lantern*, *Wonder Woman*, *Boy Comics*, *Submariner* and *The Human Torch*, *Captain Marvel*, *The Katzenjammer Kids*, *Mickey Mouse*, and *Looney Tunes*. In my neighborhood we traded comics back and forth, so I never really kept a collection.

My life as a collector actually started when I discovered "Dick Tracy." We didn't take the paper he appeared in, and I discovered it at the corner store. They had a pile of the New York *Sunday News* tabloids with "Tracy" on the front. The date was August 27, 1944 and that page was the most exciting thing I'd ever seen. I immediately fell in love with the unusual style of drawing. The slick, glossy, designed look had a hypnotic effect on me, and the action was breathtaking: a villain named "The Brow" had thrown a spear into the shoulder of this hawk-faced detective Tracy, and bending a lightning rod over the window ledge he slid down the side of a barn, leaped into a

car, and escaped in a hail of police bullets. A close-up panel showed him at the wheel with bullet holes in the window and blood dripping down the side of his monstrous face.

That did it, friends. I couldn't take my eyes off of it, and finally decided to buy it. I went home and carefully cut out the page. We lived in a four-family apartment building then and our neighbor across the hall took the paper that carried "Tracy." I rummaged through their discarded papers in the back hall and found the daily strips which led up to that spectacular Sunday. I asked the lady if I could have them and she said, "Sure, help yourself." I began to fill up a drawer with those strips and then decided to put them in a scrapbook. For years I kept this hobby secret because nobody I knew saved comic strips. It was a very odd thing to do. I certainly didn't expect it to last very long, knowing how often I had lost interest in other hobbies.

But the stories kept getting better and better and I bought a second scrapbook, and a third, etc. I kept them on the floor of the closet in the bedroom I shared with my little brother.

About this time my brother came down with scarlet fever and our house had to be quarantined. Staying in bed all the time was hard for him, and to help pass the time I let him read my scrapbooks. When he recovered, the doctor said we had to burn everything he touched!

Into the furnace went the collection of *Spirit* booklets, my Big Little Books, comic books, and the "Dick Tracy" scrapbooks. It was a crushing blow. That night my dad came home with a huge pile of brand new comic books (a very costly gesture for him at the time) to make up for what we lost. I was so touched by his kindness that I concealed my grief at losing the scrapbooks. My poor brother suffered guilt pangs for years afterward, as he told me recently when we got to talking about those days. (He more than made up for it years later when he put an ad in the newspaper and found a woman who had saved papers in her basement since 1933. She was happy to sell us the comic sections.)

I often wonder if perhaps I would have given it all up in a while, anyway, had not that happened. However, the sense of denial I spoke of earlier made me a more determined collector and I began all over again. This time I saved several strips, including Caniff's "Terry," in addition to "Tracy." My brother started collections of "Kerry Drake" and "Steve Roper."

I volunteered for school paper

drives as World War II was still on and paper was needed. Taking my wagon from house to house in the neighborhood, I would come home each night with piles of newspapers and search for old strips. Then the next day I'd bring the bundles to school. Many collectors curse these drives for making strips of that era so hard to find. For me it was a blessing, and I was helping my Country, too. Eventually, I replaced everything I'd lost and then some.

As the years went by, I became less secret about my hobby, but I collected for fifteen years not knowing another single soul (other than my brother) who collected. Of course, I wrote letters to my favorite cartoonists telling them how much I enjoyed their work—and what a thrill it was when they wrote back! Then as I began to travel, I visited many of them in their studios. Comic dealers began to emerge and from early dealers Claude Held and Bill Thailing I bought many rare old items. In the late '50s and early '60s I met several local collectors and we formed a nucleus around the Detroit area, eventually putting on comic conventions.

With the appearance of *Fantastic Four* 1 in 1961, I rediscovered comic books. This time there was no frustration at not being able to buy them, and so in my adult life I was haunting the newsstands each week and enjoying it as much as when I was a kid. The comic books are better written and better drawn today than they've ever been.

The fringe benefits of collecting are many. I've been lucky enough to attend the National Cartoonist Society's "Ruben" awards and a few of their monthly meetings. There is no friendlier group of guys in the world. I've also had the thrill of my life to be the model for a character in Milton Caniff's "Steve Canyon." (Like a scene out of Rod Serling's "Twilight Zone," there I was cutting out strips containing my own image!) The fans I meet are exceptional people. Most of all, besides the enjoyment of having a good collection to re-read from time to time, there are the good friends you make along the way.

That is the real bonus.

=Shel Dorf

