

Syracuse University

SURFACE

The Courier

Libraries

Spring 1980

Roy Crane—Pioneer Adventure Strip Cartoonist

Ray Thompson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/libassoc>

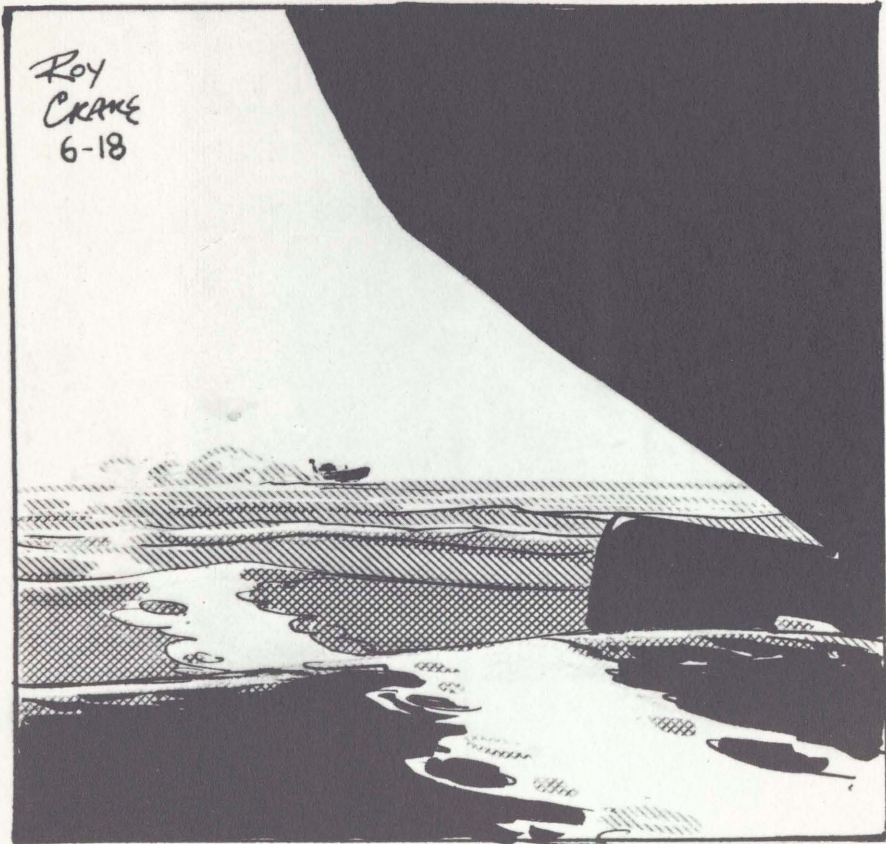


Part of the [American Art and Architecture Commons](#), and the [American Popular Culture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thompson, Ray. "Roy Crane—Pioneer Adventure Strip Cartoonist." *The Courier* 17.1 (1980): 3-13.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Courier* by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.



Cartoon from Roy Crane's "Buzz Sawyer," June 18, 1963
Original drawing size 4¾ x 4 7/8"

THE COURIER

Table of Contents

Spring 1980

	Page
Roy Crane—Pioneer Adventure Strip Cartoonist by Ray Thompson	3
Letters of Charlotte Browning Page by Donna Burns	14
News of the Library and Library Associates	25



WASH TUBBS WITH CAPTAIN EASY. "Wash Tubbs" was Roy Crane's first successful strip. He soon was joined by "Captain Easy, Soldier of Fortune." This cartoon is from a strip dated May 28, 1939. There are pencilled indications of shading for the final copy. Original drawing size 6¼" x 6¾".

All drawings for this article are from the George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University. They are reproduced courtesy of the Newspaper Enterprise Association, Inc. and King Features ("Buzz Sawyer").

Roy Crane— *Pioneer Adventure Strip Cartoonist*

by Ray Thompson

The newspaper comic strip was well established in the United States by World War I. It had become a part of every American's cultural background long before the Disney cartoon films of the 1930s. The George Arents Research Library for Special Collections at Syracuse University has a large collection of original drawings for comic strips. There are cartoons from the early days of the comic strip to the work of artists still drawing strips which many Americans read every day.

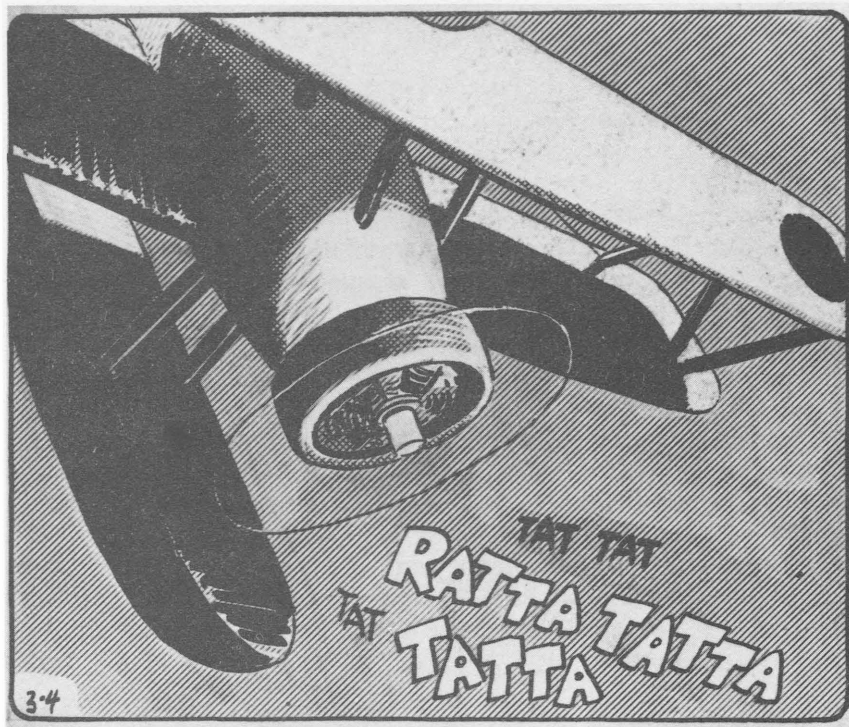
Some of the comic strips have extraordinary lives, continuing past their creator's lifetimes.¹ Buzz Sawyer and his friend Roscoe Sweeney survive their creator, Roy Crane, evolving with the times and becoming almost real to their readers.

In 1938, as an associate of the same syndicate that employed Roy Crane, it was occasionally Ray Thompson's privilege to watch Crane at work in the Newspaper Enterprise Association Service's Comic Art Studio in Cleveland, Ohio.

In a nondescript building overlooking Lake Erie, a dozen or so comic artists would be busily huddled over their drawing boards, turning out their humorous products for the seven hundred twenty newspapers which at that time subscribed to the feature service. Scattered at random, and in various stages of production, one might spot the famous "Out Our Way," "Major Hoople," "Freckles," "Alley Oop," "Boots," and of course, "Wash Tubbs."

The latter strip was emerging under the facile pen of Roy Crane. He worked by the northwest window, alongside Les Turner, his assistant, formerly a New York City magazine illustrator. Crane was smallish in stature, with sharp features, black hair, and a black pencil moustache. He immediately suggested his cartoon character, "Wash Tubbs." Cigarette smoke enveloped the two artists as they worked silently, handing strips back and forth, straining to meet the afternoon deadline. Turner was skillfully applying the chemicals to the strips, which would give them their crisp, halftone effect.

¹See *The Courier*, XVI, 3 & 4, Winter 1979, for an article on Bud Fisher's "Mutt and Jeff." Mr. Ray Thompson, the author of both these articles is a cartoonist himself. His drawings are among those in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University. He is currently working on a book, *The Golden Era of Newspaper Comics—1900-1930*.



A JAPANESE PLANE DURING WORLD WAR II. This drawing from "Captain Easy," dated March 4, 1942, uses the Craftint board cross-hatching to great effect. The composition and draftsmanship are outstanding. Perhaps this development in style was due in part to Crane's work with Les Turner, who drew all of the "Captain Easy" strips after 1943. Original drawing size 4½" x 5½".

Roy was one of the first cartoonists to make regular use of the newly developed "Craftint Board"—a fine quality drawing surface treated with invisible screens. These were developed when the artist painted in one chemical to reveal the light parallel line screen, while the other chemical (it smelled like rotten eggs!) developed the darker cross-hatch screen.

Highly esteemed by contemporary cartoonists, Roy was admired for his superb draftsmanship, inventive layout, and fine action drawings.

Born Royston Campbell Crane on November 22, 1901, in Abilene, Texas, he held various odd jobs during his early days between sessions at school. Roy became a digger on the early oil field pipelines, seeking adventure wherever he could find it. Drawing came naturally to Roy and he carried a sketch book with him, jotting down his impressions and the many ideas that filled his brain. When college courses at the University of Texas and Hardin-Simmons failed to hold his interest, he literally took to the road, riding the rails in the southwest, and playing the beggar

when he had no work and no money.

It was about this time that Roy first met Les Turner, another budding artist, and a fugitive from the tedium of college courses. This friendship, begun in the early twenties, endured for the lifetime of both men. (Les Turner retired from active work in January 1970.)

About 1922 Roy Crane boarded a freighter in Galveston; next he traveled around Europe. His early experiences on the road later became subjects for his countless adventure sequences in "Wash Tubbs" and "Captain Easy." In the meantime Roy had taken a correspondence course in cartooning. He was continually sharpening his professional skills.

When the wanderer landed back in New York, Roy decided he would try drawing comic strips. He was accepted as a staff artist on the *New York World*. H. T. Webster, a *World* cartoonist then having success with his "Man in the Brown Derby," invited Roy to become his assistant. Crane took the job, adding to his experience and skills as a cartoonist.

After a time, Roy tried developing his own cartoon panel. It was called "Music To the Ear," and although he sold the idea to United Features Syndicate, their salesmen were able to sell the strip to only two customers! It was to be his first and only failure.

Crane then decided to try another idea on the Newspaper Enterprise Association Service. Although Cleveland based, the Service did have a New York office. By some quirk of fate, the office was managed by the same man who had given the cartoon correspondence course Roy had taken. Roy's idea was for a strip featuring a little curly-headed character continually falling into misadventures. He called it "George Washington Tubbs II." The NEA man told Crane it was a good idea, but to make for a wider appeal, his character should be a clerk in a grocery store. The new strip joined the NEA Service on April 21, 1924, and quickly received a favorable response by the newspapers that subscribed to the Service.

By 1929 Crane had "Wash Tubbs" far afield from his grocery store start. His many zany adventures set a new trend in the comics. Imitators appeared, such as "Bobby Thatcher," "Scortchy Smith," and "Tailspin Tommy." To stay ahead in the adventure field, Roy introduced "Captain Easy" in the Sunday page on July 30, 1933. The flashy layout and imaginative use of color surpassed all of Crane's previous work. This again sparked such imitators as "Rip Kirby" and "Flash Gordon," from the King Features (Hearst) Syndicate.

"Easy" was said to be fashioned after Roy Crane's brother-in-law. Craggy-faced and tough, he was the perfect foil for the bantam-sized, feisty Wash Tubbs. Crane now discovered that he had a very successful feature. He became sought after by other syndicates, particularly King Features, then the largest comic strip distributor in the world.

Meanwhile, Roy's old friend, Les Turner, had become a successful magazine illustrator in New York City. When he developed a serious facial nervous disorder, the doctor advised him to seek out a warmer



CAPTAIN EASY AND THE SHIP'S CAPTAIN DEAL WITH MUTINY. This strip appears to be from 1936 or earlier, judging from Roy Crane's style. It is dated only January 19. Comic strips usually omit the year of publication, unless there is a copyright notice. Original drawing size 5¼" x 7".

climate to obtain relief. Les and his family moved to his father-in-law's ranch in southeastern Colorado.

Les found it difficult to make a living in Colorado. The year 1933 saw Turner back in New York again, trying to re-establish his illustration career. In 1937 Turner received an urgent letter from Roy Crane in Cleveland, asking if he could come there for a couple of months to help work on "Wash Tubbs." Crane's health had been failing and a long rest was needed. The syndicate offered to send its star cartoonist to Europe for six weeks.

After some thought about his own slowly rebuilding career, Turner agreed to help out his friend. Roy had prepared six weeks script for the strip, and arranged for another artist to do the lettering. Even so, it was a struggle for Turner, who had never drawn a cartoon strip before. He had to learn to make small drawings and to use a pen instead of a brush. But somehow he succeeded—and discovered that he liked cartooning.

After Roy's return from Europe, Les agreed to stay on to help Roy on a permanent basis. The pair complemented each other in many respects. Turner undoubtedly helped to improve the quality of both "Wash Tubbs" and "Captain Easy." By the late thirties, both families packed up and moved to Florida. Roy was already considering King Features' offer to create a new adventure strip and was busily working out ideas on the side. By 1943 Roy Crane signed a handsome contract with King Features. It was natural for Les Turner to continue producing "Wash Tubbs & Captain Easy" for NEA Service. He subsequently worked on the strip for twenty-seven years, turning out some 10,000 strips!



CAPTAIN EASY PURSUED BY WOLVES. Crane's dramatic use of black is outstanding. This picture may be from 1936. It is undated. Original drawing size 5 3/4" x 5 3/8". Crane used rectangles in various sizes for his strips, more often wider than the ones selected for *The Courier*. The need to reduce them to this page size restricted the choice of those to be reproduced.

Since it was war time, Roy Crane's new feature for King was about a Navy aviator, Buzz Sawyer. The first strip, which appeared on November 2, 1943, depicted the launching of the aircraft carrier "Tippecanoe." Roscoe Sweeney was Buzz Sawyer's gunner, a tough comic-relief character. A Sunday page was released on November 23, 1943, which featured Roscoe Sweeney and a hardy bunch of gunners from the carrier.

Within a year, Buzz Sawyer had become an established comic-strip star at King Features, with a healthy number of newspaper clients. After the war, "Buzz Sawyer" reverted to the type of zany civilian adventures Roy Crane did so well. The backgrounds shifted to exotic places all over the world. Buzz eventually married his wartime sweetheart Christy Jameson.

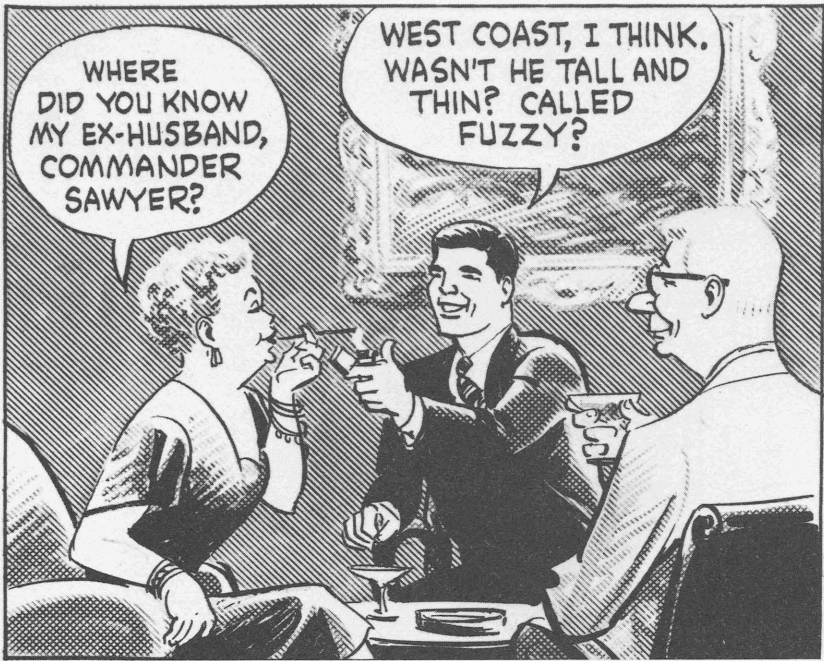
During the sixties, Roy developed a troublesome ulcer condition that prevented his daily work on the strip. By that time, however, Crane had broken in several valuable assistants, both for drawing and script, and the strip continued without a break.

Roy Crane was the recipient of many honors and awards in his profession. He won the "Reuben" (named after Rube Goldberg), the equivalent to the Oscar in the movies. He also received the United States Naval Gold Medal for distinguished service, and the United States Navy War Correspondent Citation. When "Buzz Sawyer" was in the Navy, Roy had the run of an aircraft carrier and the help of every department of the Navy, since the strip was considered good public relations. Roy also received the Silver Lady Award for Outstanding Cartoonist of the Year 1961.

Roy Crane's estate in Florida, was a lavish spread of several acres, as befitted one of the nation's top cartoonists. The house was reached by a long sandy drive, past beautiful old live oaks dripping with Spanish moss. The house was so large, a cartoonist visitor complained he had trouble finding Roy's studio!

Roy Crane suffered a fatal coronary attack in July 1977. His strip was carried on by Harry Schlenker and Ed Gransberry. It was said that Roy always had a soft spot in his heart for his creation, Wash Tubbs. Despite all his material success, Roy still identified with the brash little grocery clerk in the venturesome twenties.

Both Roy and Les Turner had the ability to tell a good story. They knew how to get the most dramatic effects with their art work. Both were sticklers for detail and authenticity. These qualities made them a success.



BUZZ SAWYER ON MARCH 19, 1960. Buzz is an urbane but cleancut adventurer. Original drawing 4¼" x 6".

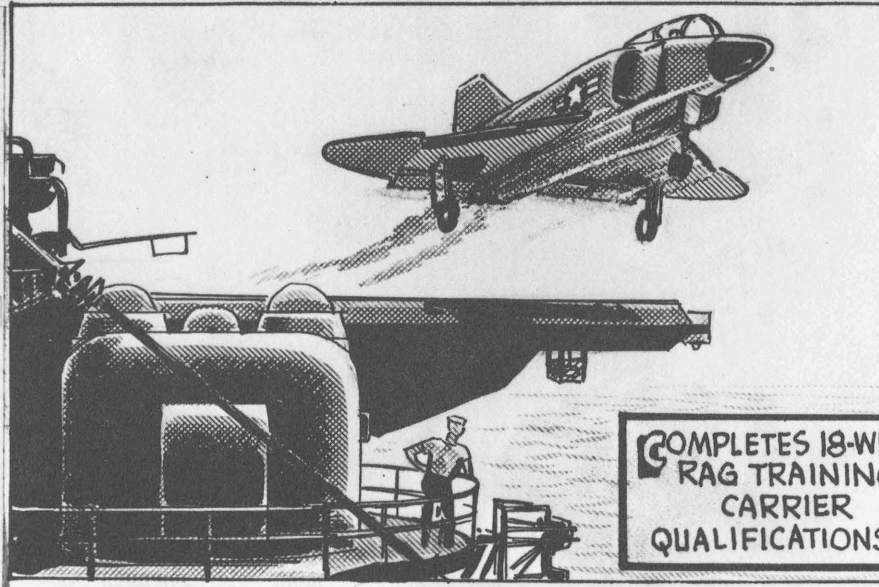
MON - APRIL 29

5224 6 CUTS! 7 1/2 - 9 5/16

4-15

**BUZ
SAWYER
IS
ASSIGNED
TO
COMMAND
A HOT
INTERCEPTOR
SQUADRON.**

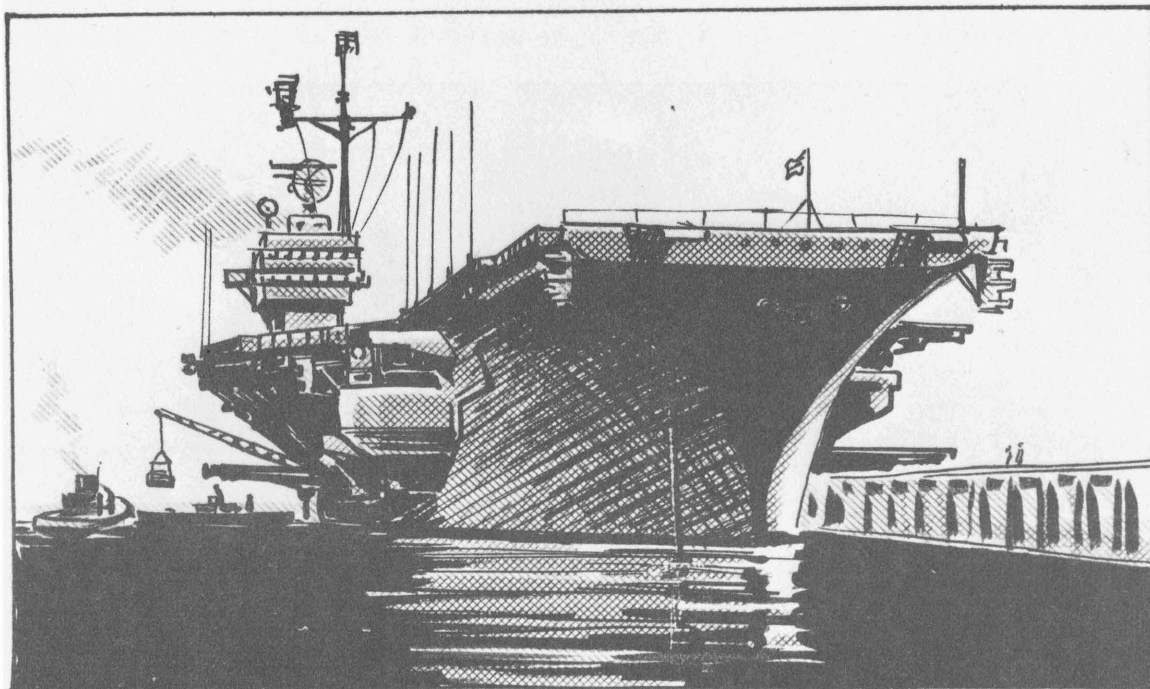
*Roy
CRAVE
4-29*



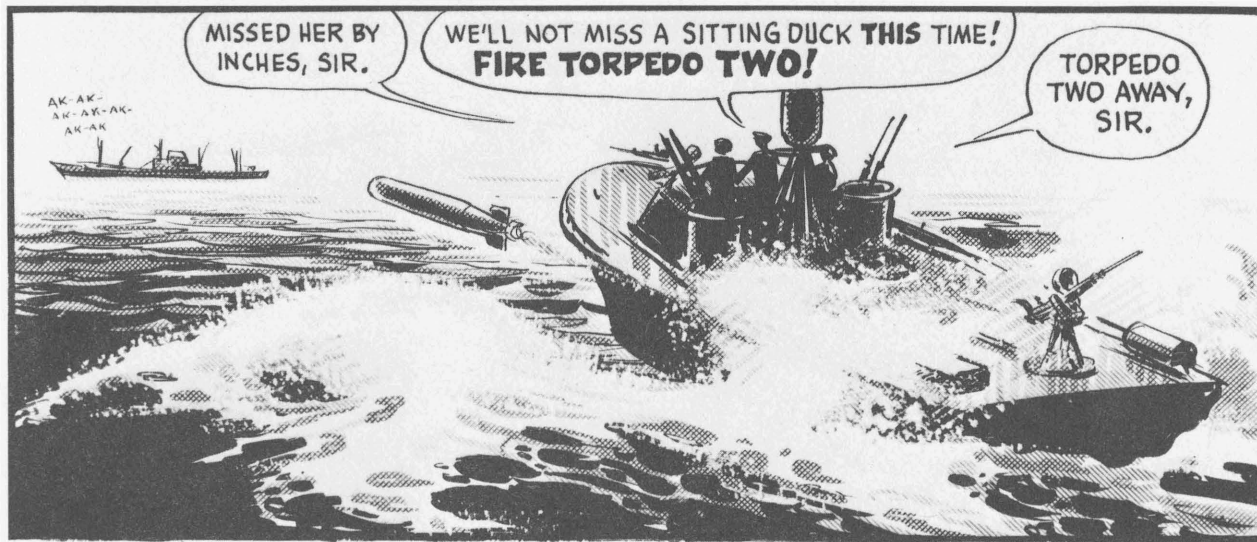
**COMPLETES 18-WEEK
RAG TRAINING,
CARRIER
QUALIFICATIONS.**

© King Features Syndicate, Inc., 1963.
World rights reserved.

THE AIRCRAFT ATTACK CARRIER U.S.S. SHILOH PREPARES TO JOIN THE SIXTH FLEET IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.



THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ADVENTURE FOR BUZZ SAWYER, APRIL 29, 1963. It is clear why the United States Navy considered "Buzz Sawyer" good public relations. Full strip consists of above two drawings. Original size 5 3/8" x 17".



TORPEDO BOAT. Crane's late style is free, dramatic, literate. This is from a "Buzz Sawyer" strip dated June 18, 1963. Original drawing size 4¼" x 11".

About the Author...

In the autumn of 1926, at age 21, Ray Thompson tried in vain to land a newspaper job in his native Philadelphia, after completing a journalism course at Temple University. He decided to try free lancing. He has been busy with an exciting and varied career ever since.

In his first downtown Philadelphia studio, Ray turned out cartoons for the then-Philadelphia-based *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Country Gentlemen*, and other publications. He pioneered in the field of cartoon advertising and created many national advertising campaigns, featuring the humorous approach.

Meanwhile, Ray Thompson continued with his writing and “ghosted” several well-known comic strips. In 1936, he created his own adventure strip. “Myra North, Special Nurse,” illustrated by NEA staff artist Charles Coll; it appeared in 466 newspapers. In 1945, Ray Thompson originated “Homer the Ghost” for the *New York Herald Tribune* Syndicate. This cartoon panel was also syndicated in newspapers all over the United States and South America.

Ray has created a vast assortment of games, puzzles, children’s books, gift novelties, and silhouette prints. At one time, he drew 750 comic strips for bubble gum wrappers! He has illustrated countless brochures and booklets and lettered hundreds of testimonial scrolls and awards.

Transferring his studio from Philadelphia to Wyncote, Pennsylvania, in 1947, Ray Thompson became more and more interested in the colonial history of the Delaware Valley area. This hobby eventually led to writing feature articles based on Revolutionary War history for the *Philadelphia Bulletin* and the *Today* magazine in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Other articles for *Greater Philadelphia Magazine* and *Pennsylvania Illustrated* followed.

During the 1970s Thompson wrote, illustrated, and published seven soft-cover books under the name “Bicentennial Press” (Fort Washington, Pennsylvania). Many of these books are in over five hundred college and public libraries along the east coast.

Ray Thompson continues to busy himself with historic projects from his home-studio in Fort Washington.