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Ted Key, Creator of "Hazel"

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Ted Key, Creator of "Hazel"

BY GEORGE L. BEISWINGER

Despite the immense popularity of cartoon art, creators of the genre are seldom as honored as are, say, other artists, or writers of screen plays and short stories. Yet the skills of cartoonists are diverse and wide-ranging. It is up to them to invent not only the scenario, but also to develop the characters, provide dialogue, handle the settings and scenery—all in such a way that the impact on the viewer will be immediate and real. And that is not all, for the cartoonist is often in the position of having to invent freshly on a rigid, sometimes daily, schedule.

Thanks to the efforts of a number of recently established cartoon museums and several nationally recognized academic repositories,¹ it seems that cartoonists will begin at last to have their work studied appreciatively and in a serious manner. One such repository is the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University. There, one of the most valued cartoon collections was contributed by Ted Key,² the creator of "Hazel", a cartoon panel about a free-spirited, free-wheeling, indomitable domestic who resides in, and often presides over, the fictional household of the Baxter family. "Hazel" is the oldest syndicated panel in the nation still being produced by its originator on a daily basis. This forty-five-year-old feature—also the basis for a long-running, prime-time television show (still in syndication)—is currently distributed by King Features Syndicate and appears six times weekly in some one hundred newspapers.

1. Among these are the Cartoon Museum, Orlando, Fla.; the Museum of Cartoon Art, Rye Brook, N.Y.; and the Cartoon Art Museum, San Francisco, Calif. Cartoon art is also collected by the Smithsonian Institution and the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University.

2. The Ted Key Collection has been arranged in five sections. The first four, amounting to six linear feet, are: early correspondence, miscellaneous cartoons, writings (including book manuscripts), and biographical data. The fifth and possibly the most interesting section contains seventeen linear feet of cartoons from the *Saturday Evening Post* era.

“Hazel” was created in 1943 and thereafter appeared randomly for two years in the pages of the old Curtis-published *Saturday Evening Post*. Then, beginning in 1945 and continuing for twenty-four years, it was featured weekly in the center of the next-to-last page of the magazine, where it was considered so important that it was listed in the table of contents. With the demise of the *Post* in 1969, Key joined the King Features Syndicate.

During his career Ted Key has drawn many other cartoons; he is, in fact, one of the most-published cartoon artists in the United States. Also an author, he has produced a dozen Hazel books, as well as several non-Hazel ones, and written a number of successful movie scripts.

There are many kinds of cartoons, just as there are many kinds of theater. For example, there is the “joke a day” genre, which might include strips like “Beetle Bailey”; and action adventure strips, such as the immensely popular “Steve Canyon”, created by the late Milton Caniff. Then, there are those where knowledge of the personal-



© 1948 Ted Key. All world rights reserved.

ity, habits, and lifestyle of the central character (or characters) is essential to a full understanding and appreciation of the actions being presented, simply because what they are colors everything that they do. "Hazel" falls into the last category. Hazel's qualities, which are by now legendary, have endeared her to generations of readers.

Many "Hazel" followers love her because she possesses a basic sense of honesty; they agree with her dislike of sham and pretense, and her disdain of these characteristics in others. With a word, a glance or gesture, Hazel cuts through pompous facades like a hot knife through butter. On the positive side she is eager to assist; but her socially-immune eye tends to fix on matters of disconcertingly basic importance. Seeing her employer's bridge foursome annoyed by a fly on the ceiling, she swats it. Why not? More than that, she has been known to turn the interest of Baxter guests to the more engaging game of poker.

Readers are attracted to Hazel because she expresses the child in everyone. Finding a four-leaf clover catapults her into ecstasy; young



"I wouldn't." © 1953 Ted Key. All world rights reserved.

Baxter fort-and-tree-house pursuits, backyard football games, the appearance of the Good Humor man are equally rousing. She has been found on top of a jungle gym or involved in a snowball fight when important guests arrive. At the doctor's, with one of her young charges, she too seeks reward from the lollipop bucket.

There are times when all of us would like to see brought down to size someone who flaunts authority. Hazel does this for us, to our great satisfaction. She is master of the perfect rejoinder. Her dry, pithy comments let everyone know just what she thinks of them, but she always stops short of the sarcasm that wounds, the kind employed by Florence, the maid in the popular television sit-com, "The Jeffersons". Hazel is frequently irreverent, but not disrespectful.

Hazel goes where others fear to tread. As a member of a jury, she demands to shocked reaction that the prosecutor speak louder. She speaks out on issues discussed within her presence. Her principles are her right; they are strong ones, and she will articulate them regardless of company, convenience, or propriety.



"What's new?" © 1948 Ted Key. All world rights reserved.

Finally, Hazel is everyone's mother. Along with the hand-on-hip attitude of exasperation comes an embracing capacity for love, gentleness, empathy, and compassion—symbolically suggested by the line of her copious bosom. She is the protector of children and animals. She responds to the call of distress in timely manner and applies a gentle touch, for wounded spirits are as important as scraped knees. Hazel believes in the sanctity of children's dreams. It is their right to grow up in a wholesome, decent household where good food is on the table and 'old-fashioned' moral standards obtain. When Mr. Baxter's language reflects too explicitly his frustration at a flat tire, Hazel can be counted on to get the neighborhood children out of hearing range.

A few years ago, an insurance company approached Ted Key and proposed a special "Hazel Policy", which would provide financial protection for minors in the event of a parent's death. While the concept seemed all right, somehow Key couldn't picture his character in an actuarial role, and the idea was never realized.



"Louder! More expression! 'HARK!'" © 1947 Ted Key. All world rights reserved.

The panel's principal characters, besides Hazel, are her previously mentioned employers, Mr. and Mrs. George Baxter, their son, Harold, and an adopted daughter, Katie. Rounding out the cast are a somewhat corpulent feline called Two Ton, another named Mostly (mostly Siamese), a slobbering, over-affectionate, fat canine named Smiley, and an unhousebroken newcomer mutt, Schnoozel.

Continuity is provided by Hazel's responses to everyday happenings in the Baxter household. As Ted Key says, "Sometimes only a few words are necessary to convey a somewhat complex facet of human nature". Thus, in one of the "Hazel" panels, her employer, Mr. Baxter, directs her with a gesture to take a piece of furniture to the attic. The caption says simply (Hazel talking): "Put it in the attic, he says! And do WHAT with the *National Geographics*?" This sharp, short, exasperated question speaks worlds about Baxter background, habits, and inclinations.

The most remarkable characteristic of the cartoon "Hazel" is its quality of being both timely and timeless. Since the panel is so rooted in the fundamental matters that every generation must deal with



"Put it in the attic, he says! And do WHAT with the *National Geographics*?"

© 1948 Ted Key. All world rights reserved.

anew, a panel from 1947, 1957, or 1967 is often as telling and as amusing today as it was when it first appeared.

Key lives and works in what many writers and artists would consider an ideal environment for fostering creativity—an old stone house at the edge of historic Valley Forge National Park near Philadelphia. “It’s nice,” he feels, “but such bucolic surroundings can detract. Creativity comes from forcing yourself to sit down at a regular time each day and stare at a blank sheet of paper until the ideas start coming, no matter where you are. I never clip and file the ideas of other cartoonists. I try to be original. I spend at least one day each week just thinking of ideas and doing ‘roughs’. I then select six of the ‘roughs’ for finishing for the daily panel—working about four months ahead.”

Key graduated in 1933 from the University of California at Berkeley, where he was the editorial cartoonist and art editor of the *Daily Californian* and associate editor of the campus humor magazine, *The Pelican*. He lost his first job after graduation at the end of one week when his employer, Disney Studios, decided that his style was too bold for animation. Key then decided to write a screen play. He tells the story: “At the time, cartoonist Gene Ahearn was drawing a panel which featured a rotund, opinionated, somewhat bombastic character called Major Hoople. It occurred to me that Hoople would make a wonderful vehicle for a movie starring W. C. Fields. Fields was in box-office decline at the time and had been paired with a baby, called Baby Leroy, for his screen roles. I approached Ahearn with the idea and he gave me the go-ahead. I completed the script and Paramount Studios made a liberal offer for the property. However, the deal collapsed when my agent demanded that Paramount double the offer.”

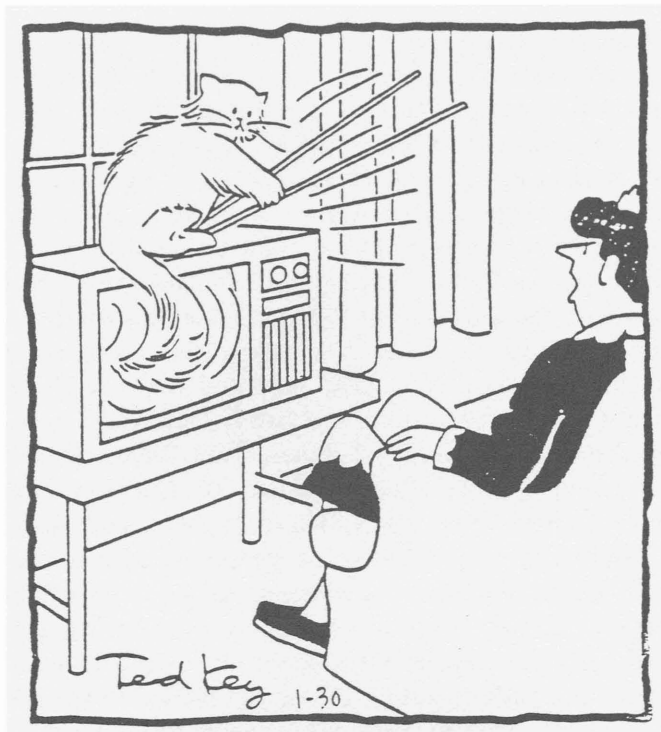
Broke, Key decided to seek adventure on the high seas by signing up as a deckhand on a ship bound for China. But more disappointment loomed. Just prior to departure, the shipping company’s required physical examination revealed that he had a double hernia. “Not only was I out of work, I was also faced with a major operation”, Key says. “But I had always believed in the sweet uses of adversity. I came up with the idea of sketching my own operation. I thought it would be an excellent gimmick to attract the media and, perhaps, a prospective employer. The surgeons gave me a local anesthetic and, by means of the mirrors over the operating table, I recorded the whole procedure with pen and pad. Back in my room,

I notified the major newspapers and the Associated Press. I got excellent coverage, but no job offers.

“I decided it was time to try my luck in New York. What could I lose? With a hundred dollars borrowed from my sister, I boarded a Greyhound bus and headed east. After checking in at the YMCA, I began drawing ‘roughs’ and making the rounds of the big magazines. If I didn’t sell, I didn’t know what I was going to do. Perhaps it was beginner’s luck, but I sold cartoons to three magazines during the first week. But to help assure that I would receive a guaranteed minimum for my work, I joined the fledgling Cartoonists Guild of America. Almost immediately, I found myself in a picket line in front of the office of a recalcitrant publisher, along with some of the most distinguished cartoonists of the day. We were promptly arrested and trundled off to jail, where we were charged with disorderly conduct. A search revealed that we were carrying forty-five drawing pencils, which the police seized and characterized as ‘dangerous weapons’.



“Deduct one and one half per cent from WHOSE wages?” © 1951 Ted Key.
All world rights reserved.



"I assume you'd like to live out a normal life." © 1988 Ted Key.
All world rights reserved.

"I'll never forget our picket signs. Each cartoonist had illustrated our demands with a drawing. On mine was a Simon Legree-type character who was turning his poor, unmarried daughter and her baby out into a howling blizzard. Underneath in bold letters was the word, **UNFAIR**.

"After being booked, we were placed with an array of thieves and prostitutes in a holding cell, where we remained all day. The big surprise came during the night-court hearing when the clerk announced: 'The State of New York v. Ted Key and 17 others'. I was totally unknown; the others were already name artists. I was the greenhorn and the others had made me the fall guy. But the charges were quickly dropped by a sympathetic judge. The publisher, as well as a number of other major buyers of cartoon art, agreed to the Guild's demands. We were only asking for fifteen dollars per cartoon. Prior to that time, we were only being paid five."

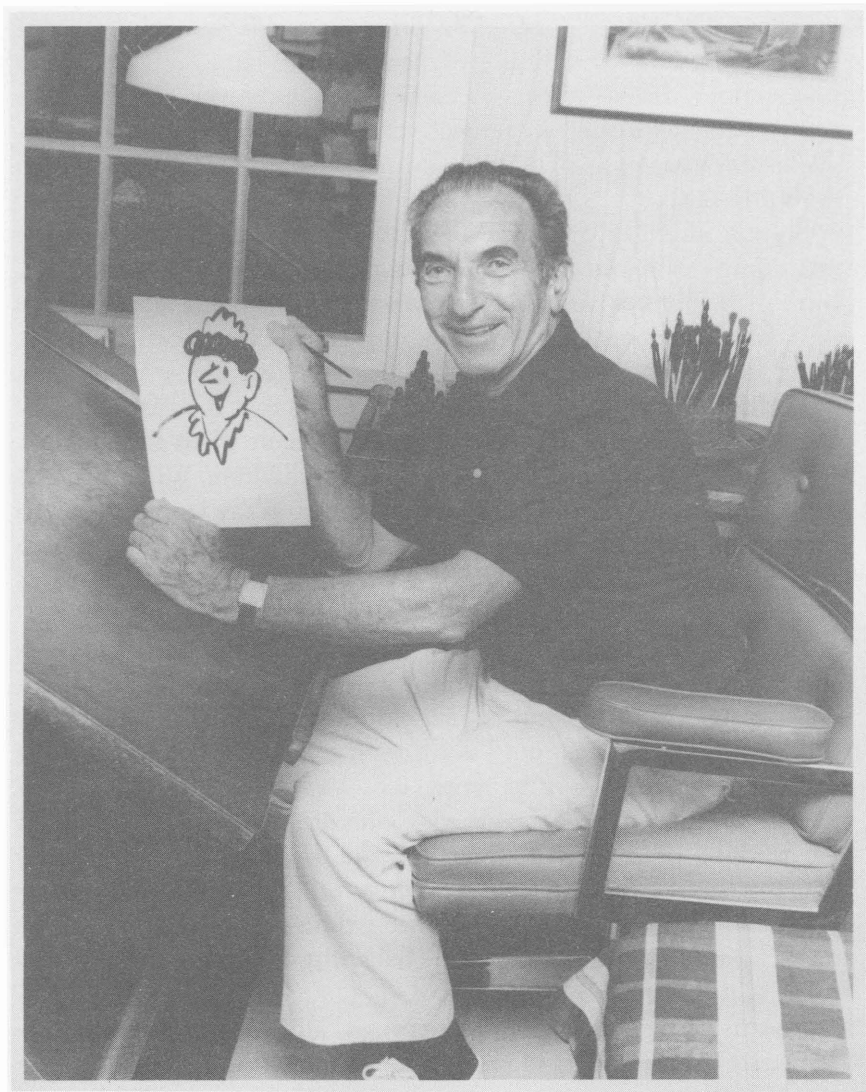
At a subsequent Guild benefit, Key met Anne Wilkinson, a cartoonists' agent and sister of famed cartoonist Fritz Wilkinson, who had been a fellow demonstrator in the ill-fated picket line. Ted and Anne were later married. It was a long and successful union, to which three sons were born. Their oldest son, Steve, is a partner in a large financial services organization, son Dave works in advertising, and youngest son Peter is a feature writer for the *Atlantic City Sunday Press*. Anne died in 1984. Ted remarried in late 1987. His second wife, Bonnie, is the widow of an old friend from his youth.

Key is as enthusiastic a writer as he is an artist. His motion picture credits include *Million Dollar Duck*, produced by Walt Disney Productions and starring Dean Jones and Sandy Duncan; *Gus*, also produced by Disney and starring Ed Asner, Tom Bosley, Don Knotts, and Tim Conway; and the Disney-produced *The Cat from Outer Space* with Sandy Duncan, Ken Barry, Harry Morgan, and Roddy McDowall. While achieving a significant measure of success as a writer with the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency in New York prior to World War II, Key continued to sell cartoons to major publications. Although the concept for a panel featuring a household domestic came in a flash of insight ("I was awakened in the middle of the night with this idea for a somewhat incompetent maid"), evolution of the character took some time. The resulting Hazel is anything but incompetent.

Key continued to produce "Hazel" for the *Post* after he entered the U. S. Army Signal Corps in 1943. "I was stationed at Camp Crowder, in southwest Missouri", he says. "I would perform my army duties all week, then on Sunday I would hole up in a hotel room in the nearby town of Joplin and produce five 'roughs', as well as the finished art for the next issue."

In late 1943, shortly after the *Saturday Evening Post* had lost a popular panel, "Little Lulu", to a corporate advertising campaign, the magazine demanded that all of its regular cartoonists sign exclusive contracts, giving the magazine complete rights to their works and prohibiting product endorsements by the cartoon characters. Although reluctant to do so, Key signed and thus found himself bound to a long-term, highly restrictive agreement.

Key's contract did give him book and movie (though not television) rights, but restricted him from becoming involved in any type of product endorsement. In 1946 Mary Pickford wanted to produce



Ted Key at the drawing board (Photo: H. Earle Shull, Jr.).

a "Hazel" movie, but a financial agreement could not be reached. Actress Thelma Ritter wanted to play Hazel in a television series, of which Marilyn Monroe would have been the executive producer, but the *Post* would not permit it.

Much later, when the *Post* began having financial troubles, it reversed its position and permitted, on a profit-sharing basis, the ad-

aptation of Key's character for a prime-time television series sponsored at first by the Ford Motor Company and, later, by other major corporations. *Hazel*, starring Broadway actress Shirley Booth in the title role, ran for more than five years during the 1960s; the television series based on that play appeared on NBC for four years, then moved to CBS.

Shortly after his discharge from the army, Key was offered the opportunity to rejoin J. Walter Thompson in New York as a writer. Instead, he opted to remain a cartoonist and to work at home, where he could watch his children grow up. "That's the most marvelous thing in the world to be able to do", says Key. "How many men have that? Practically none." Many artists feel that they cannot work effectively at home. Wasn't it especially difficult when the children were small? "Not at all", says Key. "I love children. When my kids came up to my studio, I would just put them on my lap and keep on drawing. Sometimes, their antics would give me ideas." For more than a decade, Key also produced a two-page feature cartoon called "Diz and Liz" for *Jack and Jill*.

After nearly a half-century of cartooning and writing, Key feels that he is doing his best work now. He is often asked why he doesn't do a "Hazel" panel or strip for Sunday papers. "Hazel has been very good to me," says Key, "but I don't want to become wholly involved with one feature. I love to write, too, and draw other cartoons. I like to write books, movies, stories, almost anything. At present, I am working on a musical comedy about Hazel. If I did a Sunday panel or strip, I wouldn't have time for other things. Life is stimulating and fun and there are so many things that I like to do, so many areas I want yet to explore. That's why I don't want to identify solely with Hazel."

Identify or not, this agile, ever-curious, and always optimistic creative artist shares many of the upbeat characteristics of his most famous character.