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"Say! Dis Is Grate Stuff": The Yellow Kid and the Birth of the American Comics

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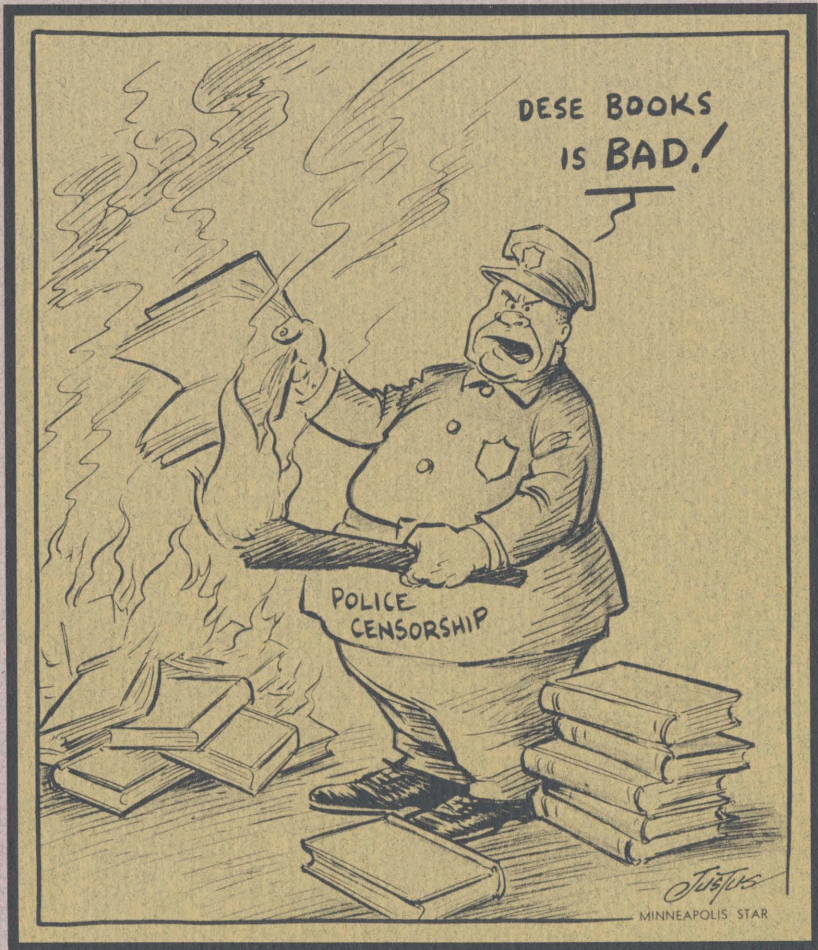
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*This issue is dedicated with gratitude and affection
to Gwen G. Robinson*

“Say! Dis Is Grate Stuff”: The Yellow Kid and the Birth of the American Comics

BY RICHARD D. OLSON

On 12 December 1992, before a gathering of the Syracuse University Library Associates, Professor Olson delivered the keynote address that marked the opening of the University Library’s Yellow Kid exhibition.¹ The following is an edited transcript of Olson’s talk.

WHAT HAPPENED nearly one hundred years ago to give birth to the American comics? Who can we thank for having a colorful Sunday comic section to read every week? My analysis of the birth of the American comic strip suggests that it occurred as a result of the interaction of three major factors: (1) the natural evolution of graphic humor, (2) quirks of American history, and (3) Richard Fenton Outcault. In what follows we shall take a brief look at these factors and see how they contributed to the birth of the comic strip.

THE NATURAL EVOLUTION OF GRAPHIC HUMOR

From the earliest cave paintings in Paleolithic times, illustrations have been used as a means of communication. In the Christian West, illuminated manuscripts and depictions of Bible stories on stained glass windows came to enhance the written word. The advent of the printing press and the subsequent availability of books ensured that pictures would in time complement stories.²

1. The exhibition was held on the sixth floor of Bird Library through 31 March 1993. Among the objects on display were eleven original pen and ink drawings by R. F. Outcault that were discovered in 1992 among the Syracuse University Library’s archival holdings by staff member Joseph O’Donnell. As a result, the Library is now thought to have the largest collection of original Yellow Kid art anywhere.

2. It is interesting to note that in the East cartooning had for a very long time been developed. For example, the sophisticated Japanese *emaki* cartoons, which

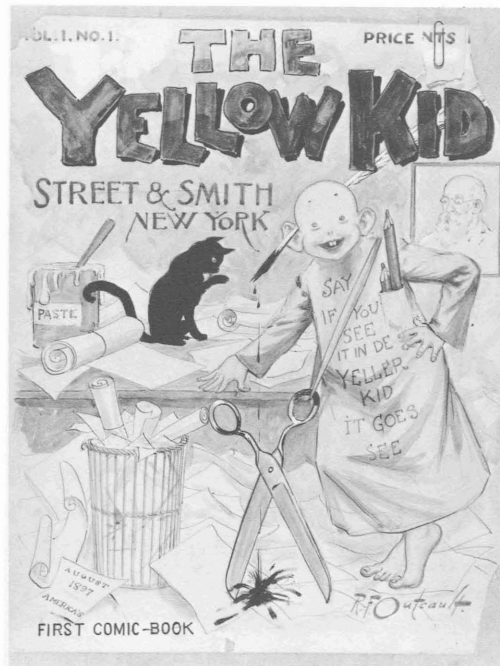


Fig. 1. The Yellow Kid. This is a reproduction of one of the original pen-and-ink drawings created for the cover of *The Yellow Kid* magazine.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that someone would eventually combine prose with art to make an illustrated, narrative sequence. The famous eighteenth-century artist William Hogarth is usually given credit for exactly that innovation. Several of his works used this device to comment on social issues of his day: “A Harlot’s Progress”, “Marriage à la Mode”, “A Rake’s Progress”, and “Industry and Idleness” were all executed in this format.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Thomas Rowlandson, the English caricaturist, added word balloons to cartoons of political satire. He was so far ahead of his time that one hundred years later, when the Sunday comic-page artists re-invented word balloons, they were given great credit for their innovation.

were imported from China, have been flourishing in Japan since the sixth century A.D.

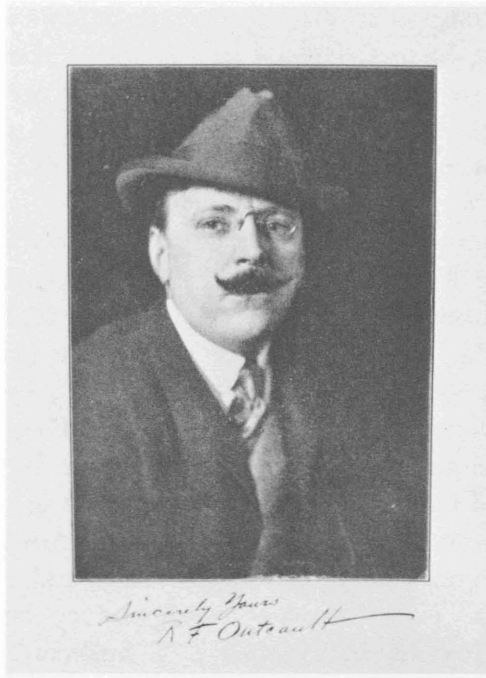


Fig. 2. R. F. Outcault. From the frontispiece of the book *My Resolutions, Buster Brown*, by R. F. Outcault (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1906).

Perhaps the most direct precursor to the comic strip, however, was the work of the Swiss schoolmaster Rodolphe Töpffer, who lived from 1799 to 1846. He created a series of illustrated stories in which the individual drawings were separated by frames, with a continuing narrative enclosed in the bottom of each panel. With an imagination like that of today's artists, he dealt with such topics as space travel, violence, and fantasy. Encouraged by his friend Goethe, he published his story of *M. Cryptogramme* in the Paris magazine *L'Illustration* in 1845.

A few years later, in 1854, the French artist Gustave Doré published *L'Histoire de la Sainte Russie*. It was a series of 477 sequential drawings presenting a serious graphic history of Russia.

Around 1865 Wilhelm Busch published *Max und Mauritz*, which was a story of two bad boys, the trouble they got into, and

their ultimate punishment. Virtually every page had a color illustration in addition to text. Legend has it that William Randolph Hearst brought a copy of this book back from Europe, and it ultimately led to the creation of “The Katzenjammer Kids”. *Max und Mauritz* has proven so popular that it is still available in Germany today.

Simultaneous with the development of the graphic novel was the introduction of the humor magazine. These magazines featured cartoons, humorous prose, and some sequentially illustrated narratives. Frank Leslie, an English emigré, brought the graphic humor magazine to America in 1863 with *Budget of Fun*, *Jolly Joker*, *Comic Monthly*, and *Phunny Phellow*. The San Francisco *Wasp*, *Punchinello*, and *Wild Oats* soon followed. They set the stage for *Puck* (1877), *Judge* (1881), and *Life* (1883) to bring about a new age in American graphic and literary humor. *Life* was the major American humor magazine of its era. Leading cartoonists in *Life* and similar magazines through the end of the nineteenth century included A. B. Frost, Palmer Cox, E. W. Kemble, T. S. Sullivant, Walt Kuhn, Walt McDougall, and Charles Dana Gibson.

St. Nicholas magazine, a product of Scribner & Company (later The Century Company), was started in November 1873 to present prose and poetry as well as humor, especially for America’s children. This was probably the finest children’s magazine ever published. It contained original work by Louisa May Alcott, Rudyard Kipling, and L. Frank Baum. It also presented Palmer Cox’s *The Brownies*, I. W. Taber’s *Jungleland Comics*, and the early work of E. W. Kemble and Harrison Cady.

Given the obvious popularity of these magazines, as judged by their ever-increasing numbers and sales, it is not surprising that newspapers started adding humorous cartoons to their offerings. In fact, some of the earliest newspaper cartoons were those that were simply reproduced from the humor magazines. If an editor saw a cartoon of special brilliance in a humor magazine, it showed up in a forthcoming issue of the newspaper. As an example, several of the cartoons that R. F. Outcault published in *Truth* magazine in the early 1890s were subsequently republished in the New York *World*; typically, captions like “from *Truth*” would identify such pieces.

In those days, before photographs could be sent over a wire, artists had to draw illustrations for news stories (see figs. 3 and 4). Photographs did not become a regular part of newspapers until the very end of the nineteenth century. R. F. Outcault was actually hired by the New York *World* to illustrate scientific articles but, working on his own time, he soon added an independent line of humorous cartoons. Credit must be given to Joseph Pulitzer, who knew when it was time to switch Outcault's assignments and increase his newspaper's circulation! As a result of the growing popularity of cartoons, other newspapers as well began looking for cartoon artists to put on staff.

The first artist to create a continuing cartoon series in a major urban newspaper was James Swinnerton. In 1892 his "Little Bears and Tigers" began to appear in the San Francisco *Examiner*. However, none of Swinnerton's characters caught the public's fancy. The world was ready for someone to create an exceptional comic character that could appear on a regular basis and capture the imagination of the public.

QUIRKS OF AMERICAN HISTORY

There were four aspects of American history in the late nineteenth century that bear on our topic. The first was the invention of photoengraving in 1873, which made it possible, for the first time, to reproduce graphic art inexpensively in a printed format. This was absolutely essential if illustrations were to appear regularly in a newspaper.

The second was the high percentage of the population that was either semi-illiterate or illiterate. I believe it was Boss Tweed who told his colleagues he didn't care what they wrote about him in the papers because the voters couldn't read, but stop those damn cartoons! The implications for the popularity of the comic page among the masses are obvious.

The third aspect was the emergence of population centers of sufficient size to make newspapers extremely profitable. The daily or weekly paper had existed for years as a small business venture, often because of the civic mindedness of the publisher. America was just reaching the stage where several cities actually provided



Fig. 3. Outcault illustration of “May Parties in Central Park” for the *New York World*, 5 May 1895. (This and the following two images were reproduced from the New York Public Library’s microfilm of the *New York World*.)

the population base for newspapers to become big business ventures, with owners willing to try anything that might increase the sales of their newspapers.

Finally, there was an unusually intense rivalry between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst as they struggled for newspaper circulation dominance in New York City, the largest urban area in America. An examination of that conflict suggests that these rivals would do anything to gain the upper hand. Thus, while newspapers would have developed rapidly anyhow, the battle of the titans served as a catalyst to promote innovation.

Pulitzer and Hearst both wanted to obtain the services of a comic genius who could draw unprecedented attention to their newspapers, and the lucky publisher would do everything possible to promote the artist and his or her creation.

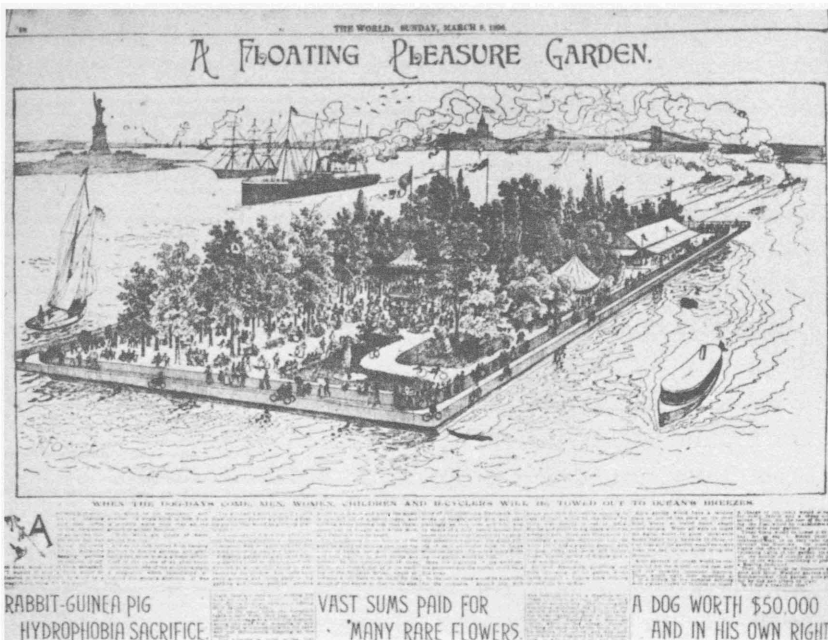


Fig. 4. Outcault illustration of “A Floating Pleasure Garden” for the *New York World*, 8 March 1896. The caption reads, “When the dog-days come, men, women, children and bicycles will be towed out to ocean’s breezes.”

RICHARD FENTON OUTCAULT

Richard Fenton Outcault, better known to all who know his work as R. F. Outcault, was the comic genius who took advantage of these circumstances. Others had tried and failed. Outcault was the first to have the intellect and the artistic ability to depict New York City as many of its residents saw it, and to do this in a manner that made them laugh. For being in the right place at the right time, and for possessing unusual talent, R. F. Outcault became the anointed Father of the American Comic Strip.

Outcault was born in Lancaster, Ohio, on 14 January 1863, the son of Jesse and Catherine Outcault. He died at his Madison Avenue residence/studio in New York City on 25 September 1928. Even when he was a child it was apparent that he had artistic talent, and he developed that talent with training from artists in his own community. He later entered the McMicken University’s

School of Design in Cincinnati in 1878 and continued his studies for three years. When he left in 1881, he took a job as a painter of pastoral scenes for the Hall Safe and Lock Company. In 1888 the Centennial Exposition of the Ohio Valley and Middle Atlantic States was held in Cincinnati. The Edison Laboratories, for their electric light display, needed some sophisticated illustrations. They hired Outcault to do the work. His drawings were outstanding, and he soon moved to Edison's West Orange, New Jersey, headquarters as a full-time employee. In 1889 Edison named him the official artist for his traveling exhibition and sent him to Paris for the World's Fair, where he also continued his art studies in the Latin Quarter.

Outcault returned to New York City in 1890 and joined the staff of *Electrical World* magazine, which was owned by one of Edison's friends. He also free-lanced and sent jokes and cartoons to weekly humor magazines, such as *Capital Chips*, *Harlem Life*, *Truth*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. His humor and art were well received. In 1894 he started submitting work to the *New York World*, which had a bigger circulation than any other publication in America. Morrill Goddard, the *World's* Sunday editor, hired him to do popular scientific drawings. Outcault's first illustration for the *World* was published in September 1894. Meanwhile, he continued to draw cartoons. His first published newspaper cartoon, which contained six sequential boxes of color art and appeared in the *World* on 18 November 1894, was entitled "The Origin of a New Species".³

It should be noted that Charles Saalburg, a former cartoonist who drew "The Ting Lings" in Chicago in 1893, had joined the *New York World* as art director. The exact nature of Saalburg's influence may never be known, but Outcault's work shows some signs of resemblance to Saalburg's earlier cartoons. Like Swinner-ton's, Saalburg's strip also had continuing characters, and they appeared weekly in color; but again like Swinner-ton's, Saalburg's characters failed to captivate the public. Through the end of the

3. This cartoon dealt with a clown who took his dog on a picnic, saw a snake swallow his dog only to have the dog's legs protrude from the snake's belly, and ended with the clown walking away with what then looked like a crocodile.

1890s, Outcault also continued to submit work to *Life* and *Judge*, focusing on blacks living in the imaginary town of Possumville.

Accounts of when the Yellow Kid first appeared in the newspaper and under what circumstances have varied from author to author. In reviewing the microfilm of the New York *World* for 1894 and 1895, I identified the first ten appearances of the Yellow Kid in the *World*:

1. 17 February 1895: "Fourth Ward Brownies" [reprinted from *Truth*]
2. 10 March 1895: "The Fate of the Glutton"
3. 5 May 1895: "At the Circus in Hogan's Alley"
4. 7 July 1895: "The Day after 'The Glorious Fourth' down in Hogan's Alley"
5. 22 September 1895: "The Great Cup Race on Reilly's Pond"
6. 10 November 1895: "The Great Social Event of the Year in Shantytown"
7. 17 November 1895: "The Horse Show as Reproduced at Shantytown"
8. 24 November 1895: "An Untimely Death"
9. 15 December 1895: "Merry Xmas Morning in Hogan's Alley"
10. 22 December 1895: "A Hopeless Disappointment"

"The Great Dog Show in M'Googan Avenue", which appeared on 16 February 1896, is often cited as the first appearance of the Yellow Kid. Its legitimate claim to fame is that it was the first strip in which the Yellow Kid's nightshirt was yellow! Actually, two additional appearances before that date would make "The Great Dog Show" the thirteenth appearance. The confusion as to when the Yellow Kid first appeared is a consequence of the fact that some scholars do not count the earliest cartoons, in which the Yellow Kid's nightshirt either was not in color or was colored blue. Also, some of the earliest strips were in an easily overlooked, one-column format.

The other frequently cited "first appearance" is 5 May 1895—probably because it was the first quarter-page cartoon containing

the Yellow Kid. Two earlier, smaller appearances undoubtedly went unnoticed. My only concern is with the historical record of the Yellow Kid's appearances in the newspaper, which is presented in the above list. Accordingly, I propose that 17 February 1895, the date of the first appearance of the Yellow Kid in the newspaper (see fig. 5), be viewed as the birth of the American comics, and that 17 February 1995, mark the one hundredth anniversary of the event!

I would be remiss at this point not to tell the popular story of how the Yellow Kid's nightshirt became yellow. The legend claims that after Pulitzer bought a new Hoe four-color rotary press in 1893 for his Sunday supplement, his paper was able to reproduce all colors adequately except yellow. After some disastrous attempts to print the old masters in color, the engraving foreman decided to switch to big-panel drawings. He had invented a new drying process and was looking for an open space in which to test it. Apparently he found it in the Yellow Kid's nightshirt, for on 16 February 1896, the Yellow Kid made his first appearance in a yellow nightshirt. Not all comic strip historians accept this popular version of the facts, but no one has ever proved that it did not happen just that way.

Why did the Yellow Kid succeed in capturing the public's fancy when other characters had failed? What made him special? Obviously, his bright yellow nightshirt with humorous messages scrawled thereon caught the reader's eye. Further, the Yellow Kid had a striking appearance. He was bald and big-eared, and at first glance many readers assumed he was Oriental. In fact, his name was "Mickey Dugan" and he was an Irish tenement hooligan. The strip portrayed familiar locales, such as Coney Island, and incorporated topics of special interest, such as the America's Cup race.

Public humor at the end of the nineteenth century often centered on the poor and on ethnic minorities. In the 1890s, the Irish were both. Although the Poles, the Italians, the blacks, and just about everybody else was also the butt of ethnic humor, the Irish apparently were at the top of the list in New York City.

Having captured the imagination of the New York City public, the Yellow Kid soon appeared every Sunday in the *World's* comic supplement, "The Rainbow", and sometimes during the week. He



Fig. 5. The first newspaper appearance of the Yellow Kid (pictured standing next to the dog) was in “Fourth Ward Brownies”. Outcault is making fun of Palmer Cox, the creator of “The Brownies” comic strip. The caption reads, “Mickey the artist (adding a finishing touch)—Dere Chimmy! If Palmer Cox wuz t’ see yer, he’d git yer copyrighted in a minute”. The image, borrowed from *Truth* magazine, was republished on 17 February 1895 in the *World*.

caught the fancy of William Randolph Hearst, who readily observed that the Kid was selling papers for Pulitzer’s *New York World*. Hearst couldn’t stand it, so he offered Outcault a tremendous salary to come to work for him at the *New York Journal* and draw the Kid for the *American Humorist*, the new color Sunday supplement that Hearst was going to start on 18 October 1896. Outcault accepted and, accompanied by a media blitz that would be impressive even today, the Yellow Kid became the lead character in Hearst’s new comic supplement. A frequently quoted line of advertising enticed the public to follow the Kid to the *New York Journal*: “Eight pages of polychromatic effulgence that make the rainbow look like a lead pipe”. How could you refuse to at least take a look?

Pulitzer was among those who looked, and he didn't like what he saw. Legend has it that he hired Outcault back, only to have Hearst hire him back once again. Finally, in a desperately clever move, Pulitzer sued for rights to the Yellow Kid. The judge decided that Outcault owned the character and could continue drawing him, but that Pulitzer owned "Hogan's Alley". Outcault moved the Kid to "McFadden's Flats", and Pulitzer hired George Luks to do his own version of the Yellow Kid. Based on this precedent, the same thing happened with "The Katzenjammer Kids" and "Buster Brown".

Again according to legend, the intense rivalry over the Yellow Kid led to the coining of the term "yellow press" for the first time on 2 March 1898 in the Chicago *Daily News*. As the Spanish-America War intensified in late 1898, and as correspondents fabricated sensational stories to sell newspapers, the phrase "yellow journalism" was popularly applied to those efforts. Remember that there were virtually no photographs or independent reports. Each writer tried to outdo the others with sensational stories geared more to selling papers than describing events of the war.

Perhaps the most interesting twist is that the Yellow Kid came, saw, conquered, and died in a little over two years. His last appearance in the New York *World* was 5 December 1897, while in the New York *Journal* it was 6 February 1898. But in this short span, Outcault's Yellow Kid permanently established the comic page as a critical part of the newspaper industry.

Other important strips of the day included E. W. Kemble's "The Blackberries", Rudolph Dirks's "The Katzenjammer Kids", Charles "Bunny" Schultz's "Foxy Grandpa", George McManus's "The Newlyweds" and later "Bringing Up Father", and, finally, Winsor McCay's "Little Nemo". If any doubt remained about the ability of the comics to sell newspapers, the debut in 1905 of "Little Nemo", a strip now generally considered to contain the most beautiful comic strip art ever created, erased that doubt. Of course, there were many others, but these were the founding fathers.

In my opinion, Palmer Cox's continuing magazine fantasy feature, "The Brownies", set the stage for the Sunday comics to be successful, and Swinnerton, Outcault, and Dirks took advantage of



Fig. 6. The first and last pinbacks in a series of 160 Yellow Kid/High Admiral cigarette pinbacks.

the opportunity to achieve that success and make the comics an integral part of nearly every newspaper in America. That trio established the format shortly after the turn of the century, and it is still being used today with only minimal refinements.

During his heyday the Yellow Kid not only proved that comic characters could sell newspapers, but also he demonstrated that they could sell almost anything upon which the character's likeness appeared, from cigars to gingersnaps. Yes, the Yellow Kid was really America's first comic character success story. He either sold or was sold as dolls, toys, advertising cards, postcards, books, blotters, sand pails, cigars, cigarettes, whiskey, soap, chairs, chocolate molds, and cap bombs. In virtually all cases, the item represented the first comic character merchandising in that format—the first comic character toy, the first comic character book, etc.

Three merchandising formats deserve special consideration. First, the Yellow Kid/High Admiral cigarette pinbacks, which were issued in a set of 160 numbered buttons (see fig. 6). The first 100 showed the Yellow Kid in humorous settings, and as their pop-



Fig. 7. Adams' Yellow Kid Gum Cards. The card on the left was printed in red and yellow. A customer would receive one of these as a premium for buying Adams' chewing gum. The card on the right, printed in four colors, was sold in sets of twenty-five with *The Game of the Yellow Kid*.

ularity apparently waned (in fact, numbers 95 to 100 are not known to have been published), the next 60 continued the series using the flags of different countries. Every time you purchased Yellow Kid cigarettes, you could reach into a big bowl and pick a button. Even in 1896, the marketing experts apparently realized that printing a shorter run of some buttons would sell extra cigarettes to people trying to complete their set of buttons, and today some of the buttons are extremely rare. Second, the Adams two-color Yellow Kid Gum Cards (see fig. 7) were so successful that they were subsequently reprinted as four-color cards with rules on the back and sold as *The Game of the Yellow Kid*. The third was a comic humor magazine for which Outcault agreed to draw original cover art. It featured the Yellow Kid and carried the Kid's name. In spite of Outcault's efforts, the arrangement did not pan out, and his art was published only on the first six issues of the magazine. The original

art for the first issue of the magazine and ten additional unpublished pieces were recently discovered here at Syracuse University.

In retrospect, it is clear that Outcault was not only insightful and a great artist, he was also an entrepreneur of great success. He visited many cities on the eastern seaboard giving lectures on his life as a cartoonist, drawing sketches of his characters for lucky members of the audience, and generally doing everything he could to promote his career. The only characters of the 1990s that rival the Yellow Kid's ubiquitous presence in the merchandising of the late 1890s are Mickey Mouse, Snoopy, and perhaps the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles!

Naturally, the newspaper strip made the marketing efforts more effective, and the marketing efforts made the newspaper strip even more popular. As a result of this wonderful symbiotic relationship, the Yellow Kid was the toast of the town! In fact, he became so popular by 1897 that Outcault painted a portrait of the Kid toasting his in-laws on their wedding anniversary. I think that this is the most significant piece of comic art in the hands of collectors today. "The Toast Master" was dated 2 September 1897. The only piece to rival it in significance (but not in beauty) is the Yellow Kid drawing that Outcault submitted for copyright purposes to the Library of Congress.

Alas, the public was fickle. By 1898 the Yellow Kid disappeared from sight. He was probably too crude, too rough, and just too unpleasant to be publicly acceptable for long. Outcault invented a funny-looking boy in a clown's suit for a strip called "Nixie". He drew on his knowledge of blacks and created a very popular strip called "Pore Li'l Mose". He tried to pass off a boy in a bellhop's uniform as funny, and called the strip "Buddy Tucker". Everything was good, but nothing was great.

Then, in early 1902, Buster Brown appeared in "Buster Brown's Bad Bargain!", and he soon became Outcault's most popular character ever. Some of the strip characters were modeled after certain members of Outcault's own family. Buster Brown was a member of the mischievous children genre, but he was different in that he lived in an upper-class setting, was always punished for being bad, and finished every strip with a resolution to be good in the future.

He was joined by the comic world's first talking animal! Now the children reading the comics had a role model that parents could let them relate to, and Buster quickly won the approval of most parents.

Success was assured in 1904 when Outcault took a booth at the St. Louis World's Fair to license his new creation, Buster Brown, for business ventures. The Brown Shoe Company immediately saw the potential for linking Buster Brown's name with theirs, and to this day they are using Buster Brown's image to sell shoes. Outcault had learned from the Yellow Kid experience, in which many of the products were unlicensed; this time he maintained tighter control over his new character while still letting him appear in every way, shape, and form imaginable. Unlike the Yellow Kid, who was a New York City phenomenon, Buster Brown was a national figure. He appeared in numerous papers, the shoes were sold nationally, and he achieved a fame far greater than that realized by the Yellow Kid.

Outcault showed that comic characters could sell newspapers, that they could be licensed to earn incredible amounts of money, and that they could do this by appearing every Sunday and winning the public's heart. The Yellow Kid gave birth to the American comics, and Buster Brown guaranteed that they would never die.