

IN LOVING
MEMORY of *George Wildman*
CARTOONIST • FRIEND • MENTOR • HERO!



The *Popeye Comic Book Review* that was announced last issue is being postponed until next time.

For over 45 years, **George Wildman** has been a friend and mentor. He left us on May 22, 2016. We remember him as the 1960s-80s illustrator of *Popeye* comic books, but that was only a **portion** of his **impressive** output. This tribute uses George's own words, culled from our 1971-2016 letters and interviews, to tell his story. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are his.

"I was born July 31, 1927 in Waterbury, Connecticut. We moved to Watertown, Connecticut, where my dad purchased a small farm. I've been asked, 'When did you begin drawing?' As soon as I picked up a pencil! I'm two years older than Popeye. When I was a kid, *Popeye* was in every paper in the country. When the chores were done, I'd just flop on that floor in the back kitchen, open those Sunday pages, and see *Smokey Stover*, *Popeye (Thimble Theatre)*, *Alley Oop* - and I would copy (draw) them! I liked what we call 'bigfoot.' The word came from funny people in the circus. The big nose, the big feet, like Popeye, the big nose, the big arms.

"The '30s were the worst years of the Depression. I remember going with my mother to the butcher, and trying to con him out of the paper you wrapped the meat in: '**Pleeease**, could you spare some paper?' But it was fun, and I would draw by the hour.

"All through high school this continued, the appetite to draw, to better myself as a cartoonist. I always got straight A's in art! I went through high school, cartooning on the side.

"Then came World War II. I sketched a lot while I was in the Navy. I later went back into the Navy for Korea, but in between, I had the G.I. Bill. I decided, why don't I become an artist? There was a school in New Haven, Connecticut called the Whitney School of Art. It has since become Paier College of Art. I took a three-year commercial course.

"An advertising agency in Bridgeport, Connecticut needed an artist. I applied, got the job, and went through the chairs until I wound up as an art director.

"In 1955, I married **Trudy Steinle**, who has made my life worthwhile. We have one son, **Karl**, married to our wonderful daughter-in-law, **Joy**." Karl and Joy have three daughters, **Kelsea**, **Alexa**, and **Reagan**.



editor **Pat Masulli**. George was an expert at inking with a brush, and his fluid lines enhanced such bigfoot titles as *Timmy the Timid Ghost*, *Atomic Mouse*, *Atom the Cat*, *Atomic Bunny*, and others beginning in 1957.

"In 1968, I lost a major account. Just at that time, I had major surgery. I was in the hospital when [Charlton] called me, and told me they were lining up a contract with King Features: 'How would you like to do *Blondie* or *Popeye*?' I said, 'I'd rather do Popeye.' They said, 'We have to submit samples to King Features.' So I submitted work, and when the smoke cleared, I was selected.

"Shortly, the management at Charlton said, 'Would you like to come in as assistant editor of our comic book division?' This was 1969, and all of a sudden, I found myself as a freelance artist doing *Popeye*, and an editor.

"I can plot stories and suggest ideas and gags, but I am not a writer. Nine times out of 10, **Joe Gill** wrote *Popeye* in the early days at Charlton. I continued as assistant editor, and before two years were up, there was a change in command. **Sal Gentile**, the comic book editor, became the magazine editor, and I became the comic book editor. We had all of Hanna-Barbera, all the King Features major titles, 11 romance titles, mystery books, war, and science fiction. I handled some 54 titles - imagine, one editor!"

Assistant editor **Nicola "Nick" Cuti** came on board around this time, contributing many memorable *Popeye* scripts. From 2009: "Joe Gill wrote six or eight stories per book. Nick liked to do a book-length story, and I liked that too. I didn't have to come up with six opening pages. I could take a nice, chronological walk through the book. And the fans liked it. Nick was good too. He could give constructive criticism to scripts. I gave him a free hand for writing *Popeye*."

George found a way to hide the name "**KARL**" in *Popeye* covers. In 1973, a lone fan sent a note Derby-ward, demanding to know just who this "KARL" was! George revealed it was (of course) his then-13-year-old son! "The staff at the office always had a contest to see who could find 'KARL' first when I brought in a new cover from my home studio!"

As the *Popeye* issues increased, so did George's desire to improve: "Besides a 'poor' Popeye in earlier works, on covers 101 through 104, I made a classic boo-boo. I gave Popeye two eyes. Buffs got to me on cover 121

where I gave him a right eye."

George was a progressive editor at Charlton: "I redesigned our logo from the red box to a more colorful red, white and blue bullseye. Our trucks carried pictures of our characters on the trailer box, making them mobile billboards."

So busy was the editor-cartoonist, he was unable to illustrate *Popeye* #120! As he explained in 1974, "It broke my heart, but all I had time to do was the cover. In addition to my editorial duties, I'm deeply involved with the King Features educational books. We're producing a series of *Popeye Career Guidance* books. They guide young children, 4th to 6th grade level, as to what endeavor in life they might like to become involved. Say, if



you want to be a plumber, a doctor, a dentist, a tool-maker, a painter. We worked with the Department of Education and the Department of Labor, as well as various universities. We have eight *Learn to Read* books which involve many of the King titles, and now we're getting into bilingual comic books."

From a September 1974 letter: "I did three TV shows in Connecticut. The reaction was such that now I will travel throughout the country as 'Good-Will Ambassador' for Charlton Comics. I just returned from my first trip. Four days in St. Louis. It was great! I did two TV shows, one radio talk show (KMOX), appeared at two children's hospitals (chalk talks), appeared at two huge Venture discount stores (signed books) and was made honorary skipper of a Mississippi River Boat, *The Huck Finn*. On September 30, I leave for Houston, Texas, then New Orleans and Memphis where I'll give a chalk talk at the Danny Thomas St. Jude's Hospital. I like traveling, it's exciting." By April 1975, his travels were extended to Spain in an eight-day journey affording him the chance to become acquainted with "some really great Spanish cartoonists."

George explained in 1994, "I was at Charlton about 16 years. Comic books gradually were fading out. This hurt. It reflected, of course, in our sales, to the point that

we gave up our licensing with King Features. Western Publishing picked up the licensing, and asked, would I continue to do Popeye, and I jumped at it - of course I would!"

George employed a new writer, **Bill Pearson**, the publisher of the magazine *witzend* and assistant editor for Charlton Comics. As George explained in December 1977, "Bill is my 'one-man staff.' It was funny; when I first hired him, *Popeye* was still dead, and he said, 'George, you know, there was one thing I always wanted to do, and that was write a *Popeye* for you.' And I said, 'If it ever comes back, I'll give you a shot at it.' And it really worked out great, because we worked up a synopsis, and submitted it to Western. They liked our first one very much, but it was weak in areas, so I set up a meeting with **Bud Sagendorf** (then the writer-artist of the newspaper *Popeye*, former assistant to Popeye's creator, **Eltzie Segar**), myself and Bill, and had a whole afternoon with Bud, exposing Bill to a lot of the lore, legend and all - the Sagendorf thinking. I'm going to try a lot of different ideas, because I feel good about it. I have more time for it now. Bill and I change, do re-writes. When I was so terribly busy as an editor, I would accept whatever story came in, and just try to do the best I could artistically, but now we're really whackin' it on both ends, in the art, the storyline. If I don't do the best *Popeye* I ever did now, I never will. I really mean that."

The meetings with Mr. Sagendorf also affected George's art style, as he explained in January 1978: "I just finished my second issue of *Popeye* for Western, and it's my first issue ever done with a **pen**. I used a Gillott #170. I was talking to Bud when I saw him last, and he was kidding me, he said, 'Are you still using that darn **brush**?' and I said, 'Oh yeah!' He said, 'Someday you're gonna be a **real** cartoonist and use a **pen**!'" Bud confirmed this anecdote in our October 1978 interview: "I'd **needle** him! I'd wait until there was a gang of cartoonists around, and then I would say, 'For heaven's sake, why don't you become a **cartoonist** and use a **pen**? I think Bill's doing a **great** job writing it. The last one I saw was a **thousand** times better than the earlier ones George was doing. I broke down and told him so!"

"We kick things around together," George added in 1978, "We collaborate, and Bill is also a letterer. Now, here's the beauty of this arrangement, as Bud Sagendorf pointed out. Many times you've penciled, and you've got your gag or your story. Next will come the lettering and then your final inking. Bill is the writer, and when he sits down to letter it, he's got one more shot to change a gag, whereas a guy who just hacks it out on a typewriter, it's going to stay that way all the way through. I think this is the best combination, when the writer is also a letterer."

In 1978, a fan contacted George to inquire about plans for **Popeye's 50th anniversary**. In 1994, George recalled, "I didn't realize it! It got by me. This is proof of the pudding, where a fan can have a bearing on a project. I called King Features, and the next step was we contacted Bud Sagendorf, who did the book *Popeye-the First Fifty Years*, and I did a commemorative comic book

From one of our 1978 interviews: "I'm very pleased with some of the things here, about Popeye's house, the locale, the seacoast and all that. Up on the top of his house he has what we in the New England area call a 'widow's walk,' which is where the sea captains' wives would wait until they could see the tall ships come in. From there, Popeye hears 'clip clop, clip clop,' and he looks through his telescope to see a cowboy going by in silhouette, off at a distance. And then it dawns on him that the cowboy is headed for Olive's house, and the only cowboy she knew was **Ham Gravy**, her old boyfriend! So Popeye runs like heck toward Olive's house! He comes in on the scene, we see the entire cast, Ham and the horse are inside the house, and Popeye smacks Ham Gravy, which is a two-thirds-page splash, and the house **disintegrates!** I worked hard on it, and didn't pull any shortcuts as far as artwork goes. If ever I lost money on a book, it's this one. Some panels had 12, or as many as 17 characters in a single panel. Where I showed the house disintegrating, that was about a five-hour page. That last, full page took me eight hours to pencil, and about five to ink."

Random House contacted George to produce tie-ins to the 1980 *Popeye* movie, as he explained in 1994: "It was a special pop-up book. That was my first book for Random House. Right after it, I followed with a *Popeye Mix-and-Match* book. Both books became best-sellers. Now, that established one heck of a relationship with Random House. I had a talent, and they could use it. They were a good account, they paid well."

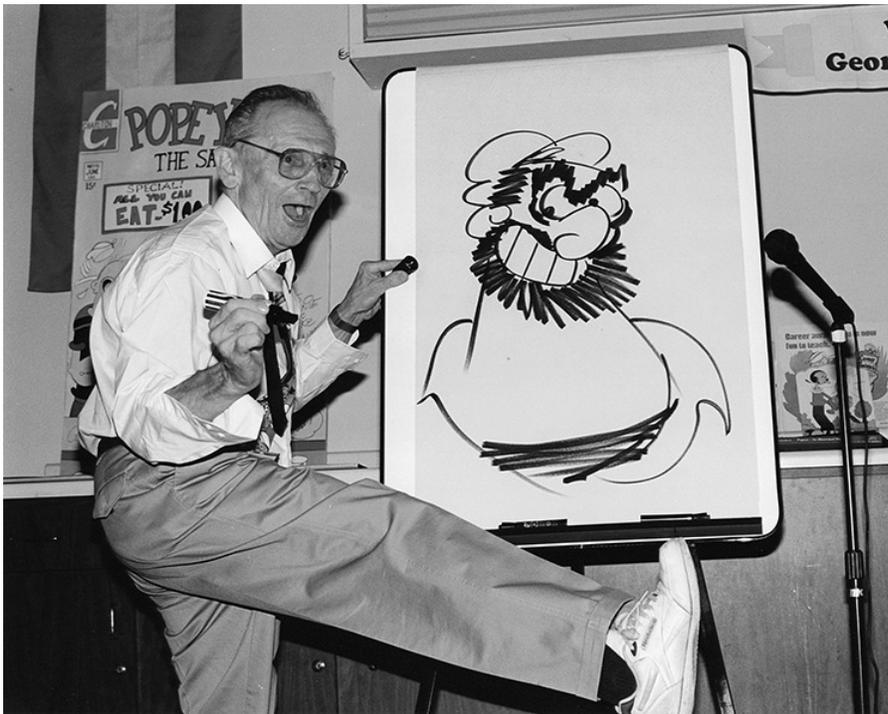
When I asked him about his career "highs," George quickly responded, "Number one, the Random House books, *Popeye Pop-Up* and *Flip-Up* books, both being **best-sellers**. That's quite an achievement, and I didn't realize that - doesn't everybody do a book, and it's a best-seller? I have sure found out since it doesn't happen that way! One wound up in a collection in the **Smithsonian** as a classic pop-up book."

In July 1981, George wrote, "I have no idea what the future for the *Popeye* comic book is. For instance, the last two books we finished will only be printed in Europe." George told "the rest of the story" in 1994: "We did something like 20 books - almost three years with Western,

when sales fell off in all their comic books. They tried publicity, etc. but still it happened. Eventually, Popeye faded off, as far as my workload was concerned, and Western dropped all their comics." George drew his **final** Popeye comic book circa 1982. "In all honesty, I miss doing our one-eyed nautical hero."

His work did not go unrecognized, as he related in 1983: "I won the National Cartoonist Society's Award for the **'Best Comic Book (Humor) Cartoonist'** in 1982. This past Easter, I was asked to paint an **Easter Egg** for the **White House**. I was one of 24 cartoonists so asked. I painted Popeye's head and lettered 'Happy Easter' above and below. We were invited and attended the Annual Easter Egg Roll on the White House lawn."

In the meantime, it was sluggish business at Charlton Comics, where Editor Wildman continued to work by day. "My department dwindled, my staff dwindled; it was like the *Titanic!* You wind up singing 'Hail to the Chief' on the



fantail as the ship goes down! 1985 came the breaking point, when I said, 'That's it - I've had it.' So, I left the company." Recently, Karl Wildman found a note tacked to his father's studio wall, upon which was lettered, "Friday, October 4, 1985 - last day on job - full time freelance!"

From 1994: "Having had this experience, I now had names I could go to as a freelancer: King Features, Hanna-Barbera, Jim

Henson, Random House, big studios in New York. I had my art portfolio, or as my son calls it, my 'book.' I had Disney call me, and I sent my book without my being there.

"Random House kept feeding me assignments, which was very nice. I did a whole series of books on Little Orphan Annie, the Smurfs, United Feature *Activity Books* which featured Alley Oop, Nancy and Sluggo, Winthrop and others. I did generic coloring books, activity books, fun books, *Fun on the Farm*, *Fun in the Country*, *Let's Go Skiing*. In the meantime, I was getting more assignments out of Disney licensors. I did a whole series of tee-shirts - Mickey goes to Hawaii, Mickey plays golf, Mickey and Minnie, etc." Other characters graced by the Wildman touch were the Snorks, Alvin and the Chipmunks, Curious George, Clifford the Big Red Dog, Casper the Ghost, the Super Mario Brothers, the Dow Scrubbing Bubbles - the list seems **endless!** "I inked a number of comic books for the Disney Company, as well as the Marvel Star Line,

with characters like Heathcliff and Mighty Mouse.” 1992 kicked off with the publication of a memorable three-issue mini-series for Marvel.

George did all the art for the comic book adaptation of the animated film, *An American Tail: Fievel Goes West*.

“While doing those special books for Marvel, I heard that Time Warner, via DC, was looking for talent: artists, writers, etc. They planned to test market *Looney Tunes* and *Tiny Toons* books overseas. I submitted my ‘book’ - illustrated a few sample scripts and was asked to do more. It worked out well for all parties as I was offered a contract to produce art for them on a regular basis.” The Warner Brothers titles spread across Europe, and were eventually introduced into the United States, beginning with *Looney Tunes* #1, April 1994, with lead story pencils by our friend George.

I had invited George to become a member of the Popeye Fanclub in 1991. Since I had missed a couple of opportunities to meet him in person during some of his Texas business trips in the 1970s, I was very glad to play a part in the invitation for George and wife Trudy to be honored guests at the 1994 **Popeye Picnic** in Chester, Illinois. “There he is,” boomed a familiar voice, “sneakin’ through the bushes!” It was George, greeting me in the motel lobby as I passed some potted plants. To the delight of those in Spinach Can Collectibles, George held an impromptu discussion of his work on the *Popeye Pop-Up Book*.

At that Saturday evening’s banquet, George was given center stage. An enjoyable demonstration of his sketching ability began with a step-by-step progression of how Popeye developed through the years, from Segar through TV animation. We were treated to lightning-fast renderings of many in the *Thimble Theatre* cast.

How did the artist react to his first weekend in Chester? “Trudy and I have taken a walk down to the Elzie Crisler Segar Park on the banks of the Mississippi. They built this statue of good ol’ Popeye, and it’s so cute. The bridge is right there, going into Missouri. I can just see, if I was a kid - kicking stones, kicking a tin can, ‘Hey, Ma, I’m goin’ down to do a little fishin’! I said to Trudy, ‘Do you realize that within 100 miles is Hannibal, Missouri, and Chester, Illinois, both on the Mississippi. And you know who came from Hannibal,’ and Trudy said, ‘Yes, Samuel Clemens, or Mark Twain.’ And right down below there, a little farther south, Elzie Crisler Segar - **Popeye!** Watching the parade today, the Chester marching band goes by

playing “Popeye the Sailor Man,” in homage to a man on his 100th birthday - and you’re standing right in the heart of Chester, Illinois! We’ve had a **marvelous** day!”

Following the 1994 Popeye Picnic, the artist settled back into his studio to continue illustrating *Tiny Toons*, *Looney Tunes*, and *Animaniacs*. Unfortunately, this was not to last, as I learned in a 1996 telephone interview: “I am totally out of the comics now. I haven’t drawn any of the Warner Brothers characters since March. I called the company the end of January, and they told me that the market was just collapsing. Some comic book companies laid off 50% of their staff, cut 50% of their titles, other companies went belly up. Back in 1989, it was just a happy circumstance that I landed back doing comics. I enjoyed it and I did it for several years.”

By then, George and son Karl were partnered in their own exciting projects. With George’s years of advertising and illustrative expertise, and Karl’s cutting-edge computer skills, **Wildman Creative Studios** launched a new project: “I’ve designed and sold a line of greeting cards.

Brother George! He’s a little monk, and he’s quite a little guy, and I did him for friends. I used to do little cards with little Brother George on it, and people would say, ‘Why don’t you do something with that.’ They loved them. So I did!” In 1996: “I’ve got another one coming out. It’s **Bruno the Wildman!** He’s a cave-man-type character.” A third character, “**The Coach,**” was added a bit later.

Animation projects entered their workload: “**The Dewdrops!** It involves the environment, the hydroelectric people,

water companies and so on. This would be a tremendous character as a logo for the whole water industry.” Karl built an animation stand and handled the digital aspects of production.

Highlights for Children, the magazine we all grew up with in our doctors’ offices, hired George to create “**Hidden Pictures**” pages early in the new century, and he was deeply involved in that when the invitation came to visit Chester, Illinois for the second time. George and Trudy were joined by *Popeye* Sunday comics artist **Hy Eisman** and his newlywed bride **Florenz** as part of a **75th** anniversary celebration. Prior to the 2004 banquet, the two longtime friends worked out a routine. Once on stage, the new comedy team of Wildman and Eisman **blew the roof off** the hall! The “Hy-light” was their “blindfolded cartoonist” bit, in which Hy challenged a blindfolded George to draw Popeye! After producing a **wild** collection of misplaced shapes, the shoe was on the other foot! Or, rather, the blindfold was on the other cartoonist! Hy had an ace



up his sleeve. He drew Wimpy, and was able to do so fairly accurately, since the design was mostly circular! Both cartoonists played cameo parts in the radio script, and returned to the stage for a live radio interview.

Continuing to stay busy, George turned 80 in 2007. Since their 2004 Chester appearance had been such a hit, George, Hy, and their wives were invited back in 2009 for Popeye's 80th anniversary. This visit became something of a **nightmare** at one point. As part of the transportation team, we were heading down the stairs of the hotel to take the guests to lunch, when George slipped and fell. We did our best to assist him, but he sustained injuries and had to be taken to the emergency room. Being the trooper he was, within an hour or so, he was dancing a little jig, hands and shins in bandages, ready to be whisked to the Chester Public Library for an autograph session!

A day later, we shot a video interview with the cartoonists, the content being edited later for a lead article in the magazine **Charlton Spotlight #7**. George and Hy appeared on stage again that evening, sketching and joking, and gave us one more live radio interview.

Sadly, George and Trudy both experienced health problems in the years to follow. George and Karl continued to develop a *Brother George* video and comic book project, despite the hospitalizations and setbacks. In 2013, Karl told me by phone that dear Trudy had passed away. George's freelance work was on standby due to the family crisis.

Michael Ambrose, Argo Press publisher-editor, offered George the job of creating a "Hidden Pictures"-style page for **Charlton Spotlight #8**, an issue which featured another Chester, Illinois interview, this time with former *Popeye* writer Nicola Cuti. George's page was a **hit**, and soon, plans were in motion for some new comic book work, which would be George's first in almost **20 years!**

I was honored to have been asked to write not one, but two new stories starring one of the first characters George ever drew - Timmy the Timid Ghost! In 2014, George penciled and inked these, and I provided hand lettering and digital color. **Charlton Spotlight Comics #1** was released later that year, becoming George's triumphant return to the medium he loved.

George and Karl continued to work on stories for their **Brother George** book (which will hopefully be published soon), and in 2015, Editor Ambrose commissioned another story. This time, he wanted to use Atomic Rabbit, another Charlton character. I wrote the script, George completed the pencils, but he asked to be excused from the inking. He was simply too busy on the projects he and Karl were tackling. Imagine how honored I felt to write, letter, ink and color this new story! "Lip Stick-Up" guest-starred Pudgy Pig (another character George worked on in the late 1950s) and the one and only Brother George! **Charlton Spotlight #9** was a winter-spring 2015-16 release. (Please visit **YouTube** and search for "Charlton Spotlight #9" for a short video promo!)

With the renewed interest in Charlton Comics, producers Jackie Zbuska and Keith Larsen launched a docu-



mentary entitled **Charlton Comics: The Movie**. On April 10, 2016, the crew met with George and Karl Wildman, recording an interview with George, tracing his history as the dynamic editor of that comic book line.

I am thankful George was interviewed in April, because May was not a good month. Karl informed me that George suffered a heart attack, and was hospitalized. I received daily reports in a three-way chat I shared with Karl and Mike Ambrose. On one such update, George seemed to be feeling better. He even drew a sketch! But later that evening, he was moved to a hospice facility. Laura and I were preparing to go to church the morning of May 22. George had been on our church prayer list since the heart attack. I checked my messages, and learned that, in Karl's words, "The ship has sailed."

One week later, in my comic strip *Lum and Abner*, I offered my tribute in a scene depicting several of the characters smiling and laughing, each reading a different George Wildman comic or children's book in the Pine Ridge Library. (www.lumandabnersociety.org, click the link for the comic strip.)

Other tributes are forthcoming! I was asked to produce the coloring for a **never-published 1977 cover**, discovered in George's files by Karl! This is slated for publication by **Yoe Books/IDW**. Mike Ambrose is assembling **Charlton Spotlight #10**, which will contain an excellent full-color tribute to George by several contributors. (Please visit www.charltonspotlight.net.)

As I complete this article, days before what would have been George's 89th birthday, I still find it difficult to believe I can't pick up the phone and give him a call, state my name, and hear him say, "**Holy cats!**" or receive another decorated envelope in the mail. How blessed I was to have finally worked with him on three comic book stories. I cannot properly express how thankful I am for 45 years of inspiration and friendship.

One more thing.

George Wildman's final sketch?

Popeye!

"Uncle Donnie" Pitchford
Special thanks to Karl Wildman for photos