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Comics and Candidates

BY SUSAN PARKS AND KIM ALLEN SCOTT

SOME INTERESTING changes occurred in Arkansas politics after World War II. Many Arkansas veterans had gained a different world view from their experiences and became impatient with the "politics as usual" they found on their return home. During the postwar years, former soldiers and sailors began to survey the state's governmental landscape, hoping to bring issues as well as personalities into the Arkansas political arena. Fresh developments in the communications media allowed these innovative office seekers to experiment with diverse means of reaching voters with their message. One of the new media developments, political comics, and the role those comics played in the Arkansas elections of 1948 and 1950 are the topics of this paper. We will begin by defining what we mean by "political comics," examine some of their characteristics, and then discuss their use during the postwar political contests in Arkansas.

Political cartoons are generally thought of as single-panel sketches heavily laced with sarcastic symbolism. These drawings have appeared in Arkansas newspapers ever since 1856, but the closely related art form of political comics did not emerge until the early twentieth century. In order to make the distinction between political *cartoons* and political *comics* clear, we will discuss some of the unique aspects of comics and sketch their history.

The daily and Sunday comic strips in American newspapers are read by millions of people of all educational and social levels, and it is no exaggeration to add that some newspaper readers

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consider the comics page to be the priority feature of their reading. Comic books, on the other hand, are generally regarded by adults as trivial and juvenile. A business executive at lunch can talk about "Calvin and Hobbs" or "Doonsbury" without embarrassment, but that same person would be mortified to be found reading an issue of *Superman* or *Sergeant Rock*. Aside from noting this important difference of reputation between comic books and comic strips, this essay will describe both formats as "Sequential Art."

A good definition of sequential art describes it as a narrative told in a series of drawings which includes either dialogue in balloons, or narrative text, or both. There are hundreds of examples of proto-sequential art in history, ranging from the famous cave paintings in France to the Beaux Tapestry. What these early non-textual examples should make plain is that this medium is uniquely suited for communicating ideas and events to any audience, be they highly educated, illiterate, or from an entirely different culture.

Modern sequential art had to wait for technological advances in the printing process to unite text and pictures. The animated cartoon, the movie, and the comic strip were all born within a few years of each other, near the turn of the twentieth century. Each appeared independently, yet each one influenced the other. For example, sequential art uses the same angle shots, framing, and lighting of motion pictures, and modern movie makers always use a "story board" to help plan the shooting sequence of a film.

Comic books, as separate publications, did not appear in America until the mid-1930s. Most experts agree that the publication that marks the first real comic book is the June 1938 debut of *Action Comics* and its hero, Superman. Superman is also an example of how animated cartoons influenced comics. In the first few issues of *Action Comics*, Superman could only "leap tall buildings in a single bound" by taking giant hops to propel himself to the rescue. When Max Fleischer started producing animated cartoons of the Man of Steel in 1939, Superman was given the power of flight. This added superpower eventually came back to the comic book character.

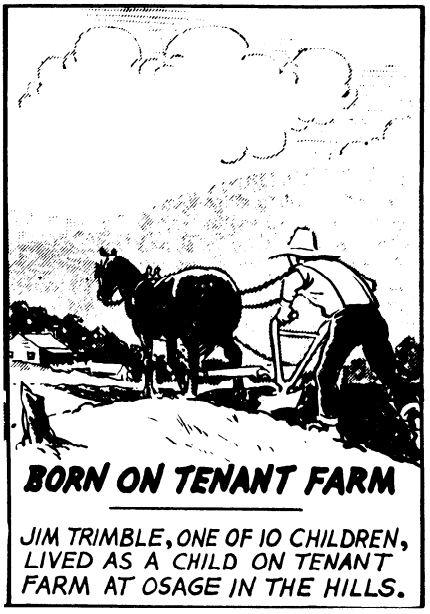
The golden age of comic books lasted from 1945 to 1954 as the publications began to explore all kinds of topics like history

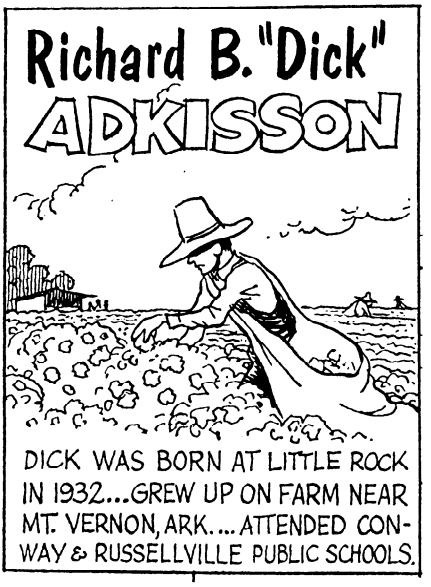
and politics, but something else began to happen to sequential art. The unrestrained freedom of expression led to abuses in the comic book world. One publisher in particular, William M. Gaines, began distributing such gruesome and often perverse horror stories that some concerned parents cried "foul." These abuses led to a congressional hearing in 1954, the creation of a self-regulating "Comics Code Authority" for the industry, and the lasting reputation of comic books as examples of the very worst in juvenile literature.

During the nine years following World War II, and before the Comics Code Authority gutted the medium, the popularity of sequential art gained the attention of political strategists. In 1948 the Democratic National Committee looked at the incredible sales figures for comic books—over 60 million per month—and decided to produce one of their own for the presidential campaign, *The Story of Harry S. Truman.* It was not the first time that a politician had told the story of his life in sequential art. For example, in 1928 a cartoonist named Satterfield produced a series of sequential art episodes of Herbert Hoover's biography for syndicated distribution and at least one Arkansas newspaper, the *Prairie Grove Herald,* carried the strip. The real significance of the Truman publication is its format as a comic book rather than a comic strip.

Regardless of their layout in either newspaper or booklet form, certain features of the Hoover, Truman, and later sequential art political biographies appeared with such regularity that they suggest a formula that the creators felt obliged to follow. Almost every comic examined in this study used standardized drawings to illustrate a candidate's humble origins, work ethic, sports achievements, and military service. Humble origins were usually invoked with images of rural life, such as Herbert Hoover's father cutting hay with a hand scythe. The same bucolic background was used in a 1966 appeal by Richard Adkisson when he ran for prosecuting attorney of the 6th Arkansas Judicial District, and even in a 1972 obituary of congressman Jim Trimble [Figure 1].

But the sequential art biographers felt obliged to emphasize their subject's work ethic with additional panels. Usually these drawings allowed voters to see the politician as a person unafraid

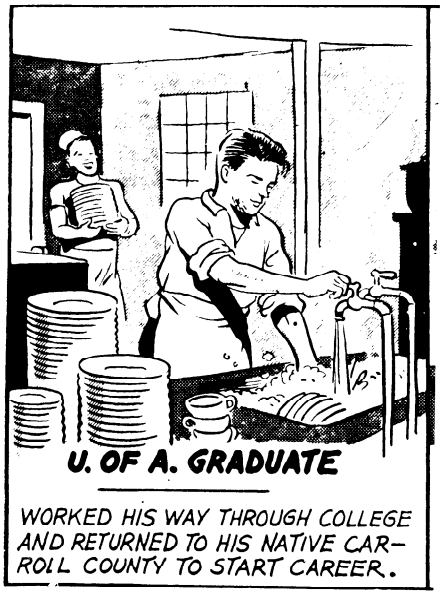




1. Herbert Hoover's father, settling in Iowa, wrested a hard-earned living from the soil as a pioneer farmer.

FIGURE 1
THE CANDIDATE'S HUMBLE ORIGINS. (A) "Pioneers of Power for the Farm: Jim Trimble" (Courtesy of the University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville); (B) "Richard B. 'Dick' Adkisson" (*Arkansas Gazette*, July 24, 1966); (C) "Pictorial Life of Herbert Hoover" (Courtesy of the University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville).

of even the most menial tasks in the quest for self-improvement. An interesting recurring choice of images in this category was that of washing dishes to earn one's way through school [Figure 2], but politicians were also pictured working as longshoremen, lumberjacks, and coal miners in their youth.



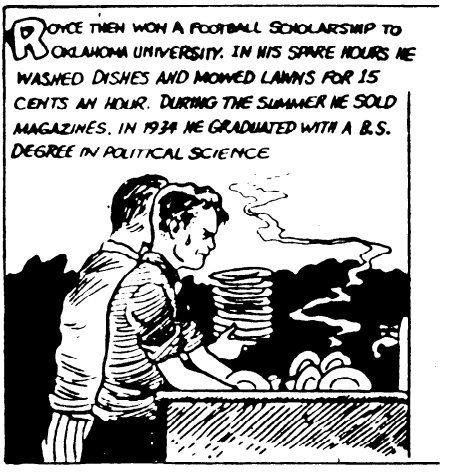
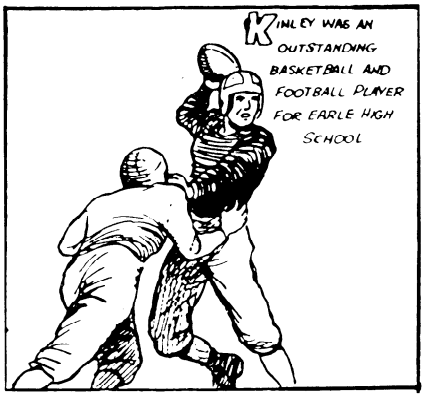
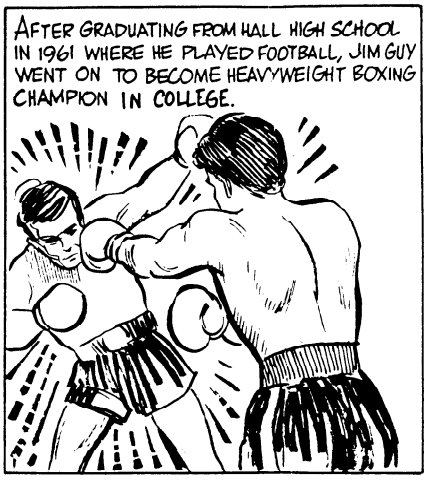


FIGURE 2
THE CANDIDATE'S WORK ETHIC. (A) "Pioneers of Power for the Farm: Jim Trimble" (Courtesy of the University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville); (B) "The Story of Royce Upshaw" (Courtesy of the Arkansas History Commission); (C) *The Story of Sid McMath* (Courtesy Sidney S. McMath).





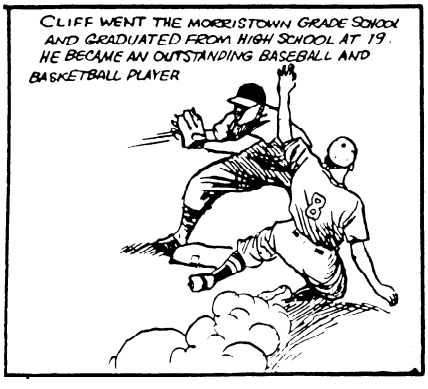


FIGURE 3
THE CANDIDATE'S SPORTS ACHIEVEMENT. (A) "The Story of Kinley Ray, Candidate for County Court Clerk" (Courtesy of the Arkansas History Commission); (B) "Jim Guy Tucker" (Courtesy of the Author); (C) "The Story of Cliff Britton, Candidate for Tax Assessor" (Courtesy of the Arkansas History Commission).

Excellence in sports also seemed to be an important criteria for a politician's sequential art achievements. An action-packed sketch of Kinley Ray, a postwar candidate for Crittenden County court clerk, about to pass a football, differed from others of Jim Guy Tucker in 1972 and Cliff Britton in 1948 only in the sport chosen to illustrate [Figure 3].

Military service was the final common denominator of most sequential art biographies and, as one would expect, its depiction in the immediate postwar examples was the most pronounced. The more recent biographies, such as those drawn for Sam Boyce in 1962, Dick Adkisson in 1966, and Jim Guy Tucker in 1972 still

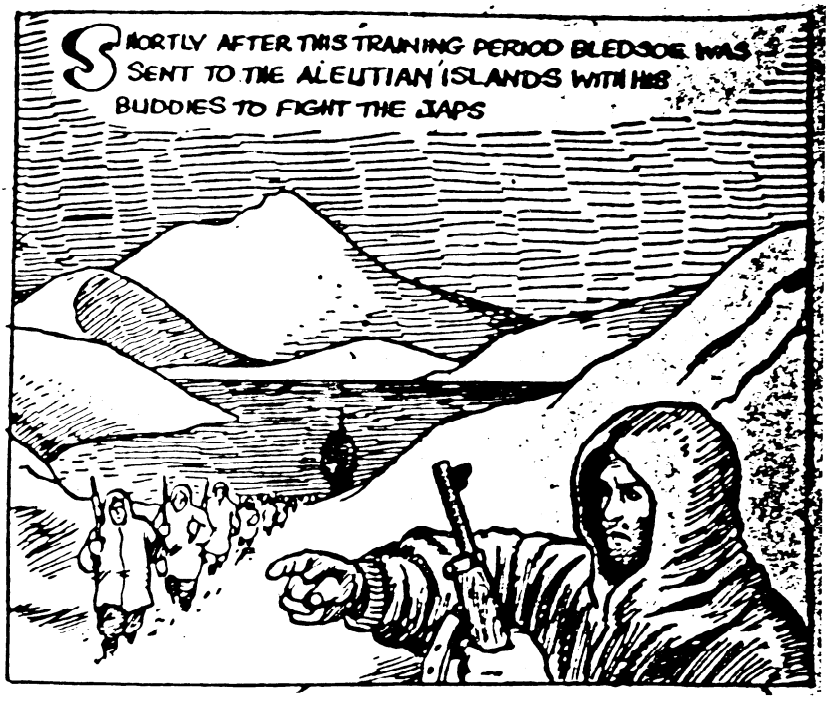
included an obligatory sketch of the candidate in uniform, but an action depiction of the politician charging a machine gun nest or manning a bombardier sight had been left behind [Figure 4]. (Jim Guy Tucker's biography does show combat occurring behind the subject as he sits at a typewriter, but Tucker himself is not involved.) The more dramatic presentation of warfare, and the candidates' participation therein, was a feature particularly embraced by a group of veterans immediately following World War II whose political agenda became known as the "G.I. Revolt."

The G.I. Revolt began in 1946 when former Marine and war veteran Sidney S. McMath spearheaded a drive to clean up the Garland County government. Two years later Sid ran for governor, and another group of veterans who wanted to follow his lead in Crittenden County also decided to campaign for office. These G.I. candidates were among the first in Arkansas to use sequential art in their campaigns.

Two rival newspapers in West Memphis provided the battlefield. The *Crittenden County Times*, owned by C. H. Brown and son, supported the incumbent county government headed by Judge Cy Bonds. The Browns were opposed by the *Arkansas News*, a feisty semi-weekly owned by Jack and Pete Coughlin, who charged that Bonds's administration was a "machine" that controlled Crittenden County through an arbitrary enforcement of the Arkansas poll tax law. The Coughlins were war veterans (Pete was known as the "Sergeant York of the Air" for his exploits), and they had a surprise weapon against the Browns and Judge Bonds in their arsenal: political cartoonist George Fisher worked for them.

The reformers of Crittenden County organized themselves under the name "G.I. Better Government League" and fielded candidates for every major county office and two seats in the General Assembly during the 1948 Democratic primary: James Bledsoe, sheriff; Royce Upshaw, judge; Kinley Ray, court clerk; Cliff Britton, tax assessor; Dana Sulcer, treasurer; Emmett Colvin, representative; Edward Horton, representative. They began a poll tax drive to register voters and made a contest out of the effort by promising a new car to one of the lucky registrants. The Coughlins added their clout in the *Arkansas News* with traditional editorial endorsements and a healthy dose of personal journalism.

MAJOR, CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT IN THE WORLD WE ARE FIGHTING FOR?
OH, OH! THIS MUST BE TOO MUCH FOR JOHNNY O'NEAL. HE'S CRACKING UP!


SHORTLY AFTER THIS TRAINING PERIOD BLEDSOE WAS SENT TO THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS WITH HIS BUDDIES TO FIGHT THE JAPS

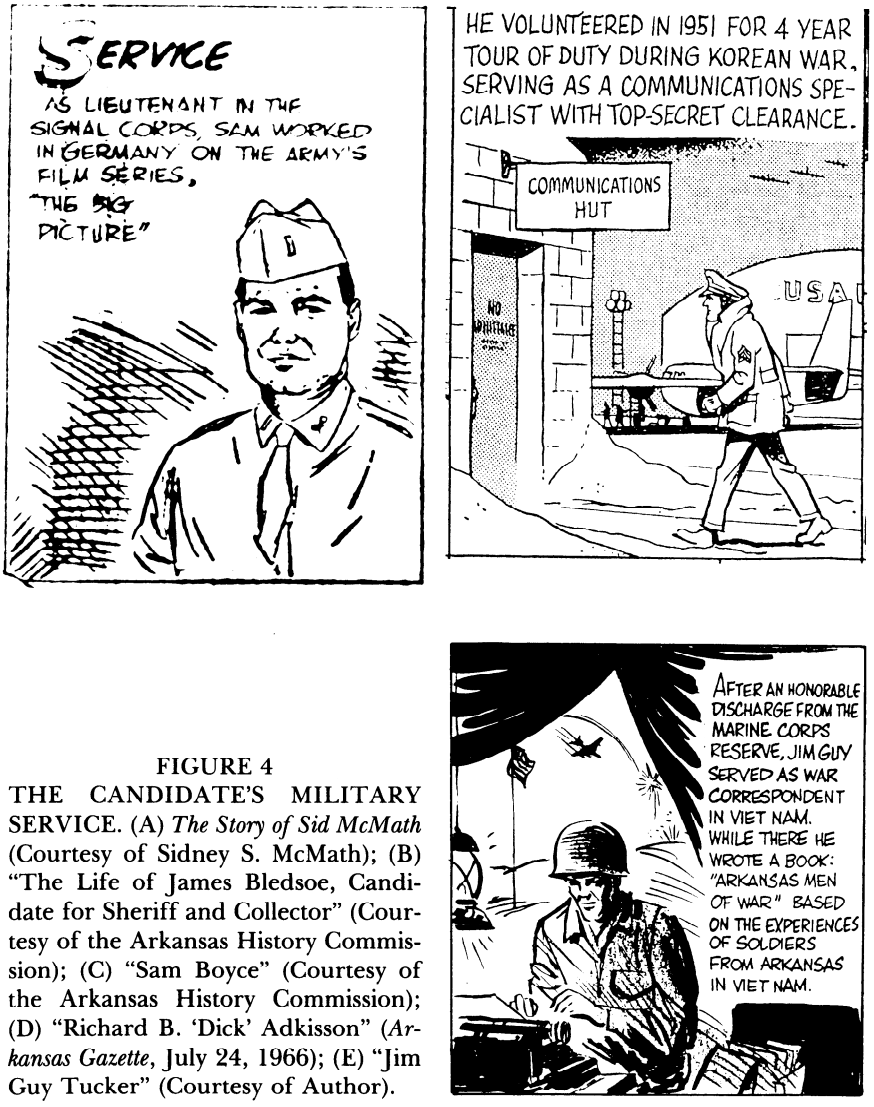


FIGURE 4
THE CANDIDATE'S MILITARY SERVICE. (A) *The Story of Sid McMath* (Courtesy of Sidney S. McMath); (B) "The Life of James Bledsoe, Candidate for Sheriff and Collector" (Courtesy of the Arkansas History Commission); (C) "Sam Boyce" (Courtesy of the Arkansas History Commission); (D) "Richard B. 'Dick' Adkisson" (*Arkansas Gazette*, July 24, 1966); (E) "Jim Guy Tucker" (Courtesy of Author).

They referred to one of the Browns as "Old Stinky," during the campaign, and they had to answer libel charges for stinging comments they published about Judge Bonds. The Browns's *Crittenden County Times* fought back with accusations of the G.I. candidates' association with gamblers, their rude public behavior at

sporting events, and pointed questions about when that promised contest prize car was going to be delivered to the winner.

After losing the libel case to Judge Bonds, the Coughlins apparently looked for a safer method of campaigning as the August 11 primary approached. Probably using the Truman comic book as their inspiration, the candidates asked George Fisher to draw brief biographical comic strips of themselves for publication in the *Arkansas News*. The Fisher biographies appeared in the August 8, 1948, edition. The biography on county judge candidate Royce Upshaw is the longest, taking up a full page of pictures and text. It also stands as the best example of all the classic elements of sequential art political biography: panels that illustrate the candidate's humble origins, his adherence to the Protestant work ethic, his sports achievements, and, of course, his war record. Upshaw's biography also detailed the Better Government League's poll tax drive (delicately omitting any mention of the car contest) and showed the opposition as corrupt "bad guys." An interesting feature can be seen in the lettering of the Upshaw comic's dialogue balloons; the opposition's leader's names have been censored inside the narrative text, but the "bad guys" are drawn standing in front of a doorway clearly labeled "sheriff" [Figure 5].

The *Crittenden County Times* did not meet the G.I. Candidates's challenge with sequential art biographies of its own county candidates, probably because the Browns lacked an artist with George Fisher's skill. However, the *Times* did run a comic for Jim McDaniel, a Democratic primary candidate for the United States Congress. The technical quality of this biography is rather poor; the panels are actually numbered as if the unidentified artist expected readers to need guidance from one panel to the next. In spite of its crude layout, the McDaniel biography also contains all of the elements of the formula mentioned earlier.

In the end, the one thing all of the G.I. candidates had in common was defeat. Only Royce Upshaw and James Bledsoe came close to defeating the incumbents, but they still lost by a spread of over six hundred votes each. Coincidentally, it was the absentee ballots that the G.I.'s challenged later—and those ballots amounted to about six hundred votes total—as being fraudulent that made the crucial difference.

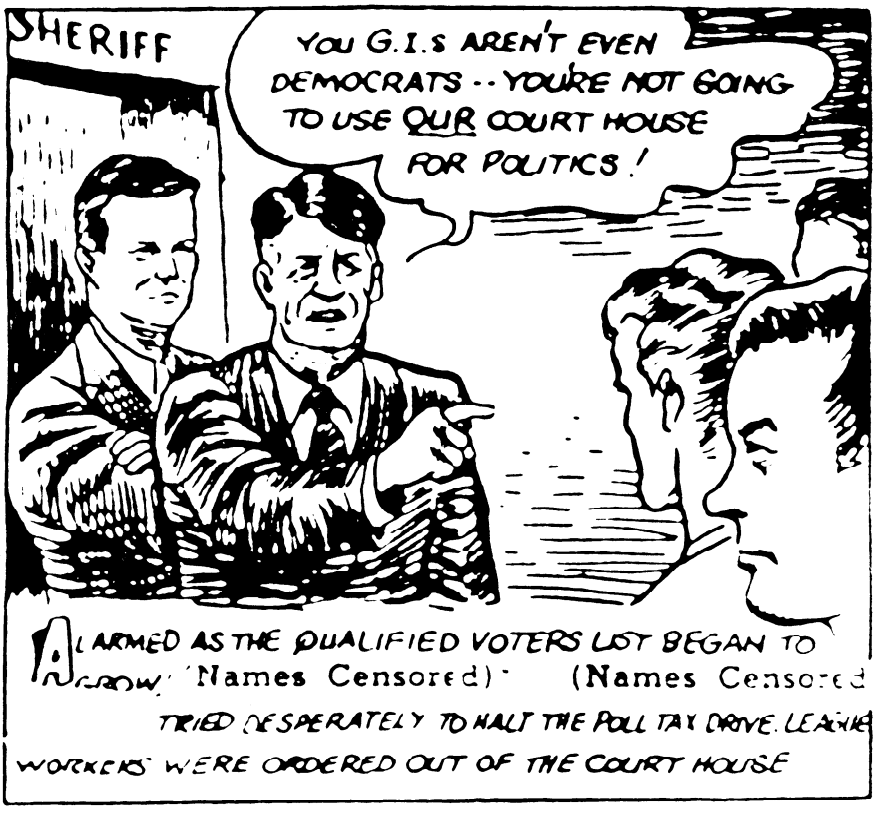


FIGURE 5
GOOD GUYS VERSUS BAD GUYS. In "The Story of Royce Upshaw" (Courtesy of the Arkansas History Commission).

The defeat of the sequential art candidates did not end Arkansas's political interest in the medium. In fact, it reached its highest level in the 1950 campaign for governor. The origin of the famous Sid McMath comic book is somewhat mysterious. McMath himself does not recall who came up with the idea for the comic, and although he correctly remembers George Fisher as a valuable member of his campaign team, Fisher himself is adamant that he did not draw the comic book. His theory is that the McMath comic came from the Democratic National Committee, the same people who did the Truman comic two years previous [Figure 6].

The Story of Sid McMath is a masterpiece. Eight pages in full color, it tells the story of the candidate in varied sequences rang-

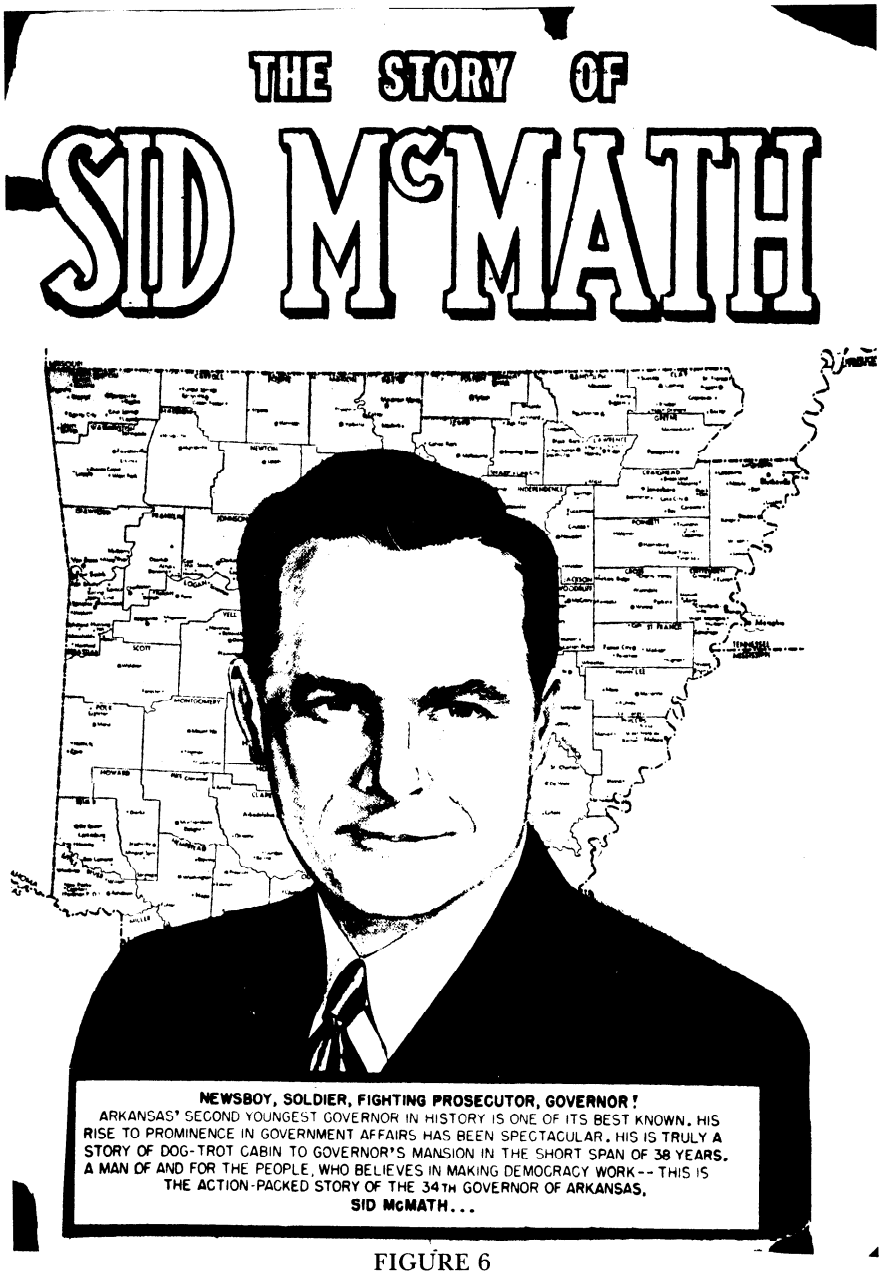
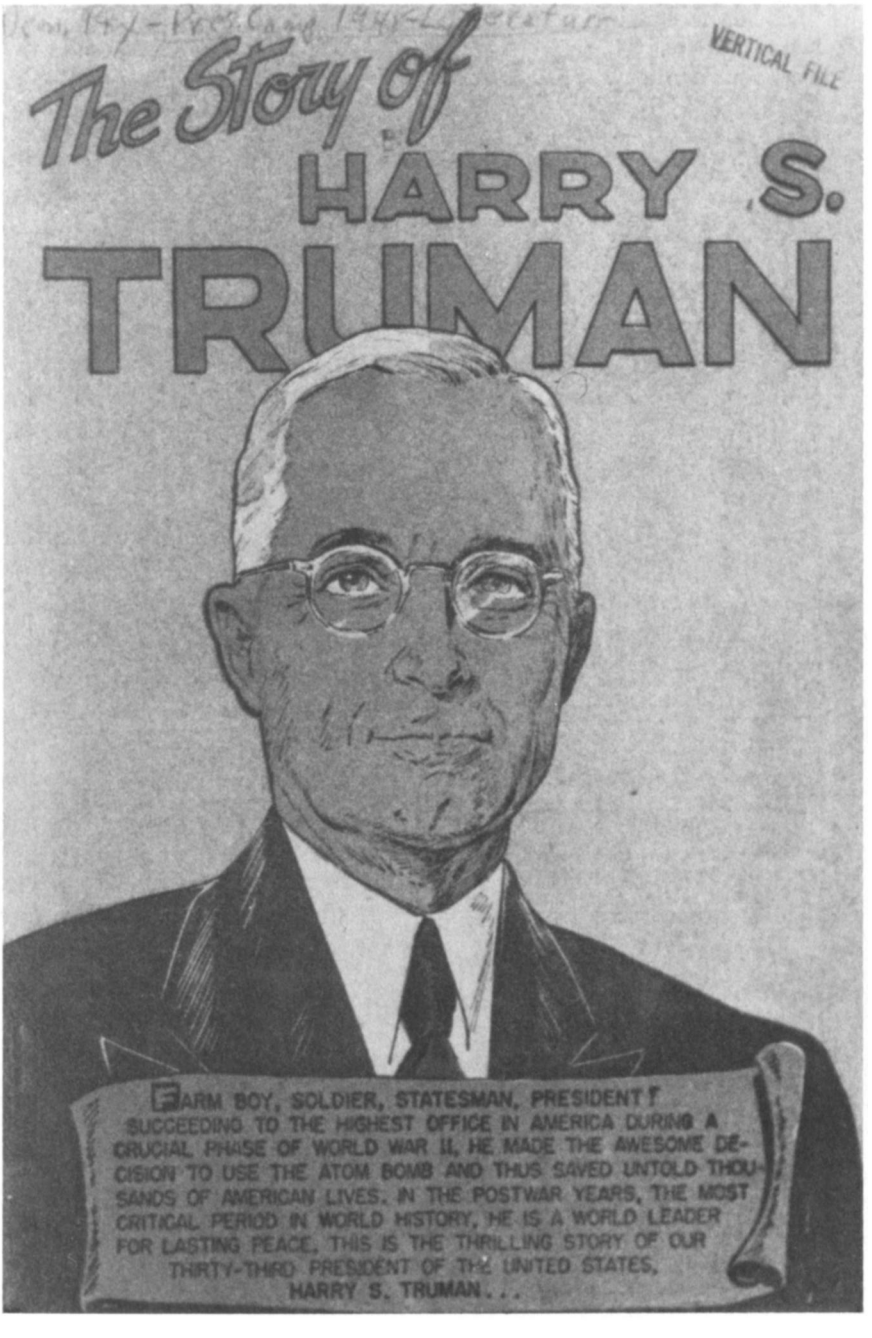


FIGURE 6

A COMPARISON OF THE TRUMAN AND MCMATH COMIC BOOK COVERS. (Courtesy of the National Democratic Committee, Harry S. Truman Library and Sidney S. McMath).


The Story of
HARRY S.
TRUMAN
VERTICAL FILE
FARM BOY, SOLDIER, STATESMAN, PRESIDENT! SUCCEEDING TO THE HIGHEST OFFICE IN AMERICA DURING A CRUCIAL PHASE OF WORLD WAR II, HE MADE THE AWESOME DECISION TO USE THE ATOM BOMB AND THUS SAVED UNTOLD THOUSANDS OF AMERICAN LIVES. IN THE POSTWAR YEARS, THE MOST CRITICAL PERIOD IN WORLD HISTORY, HE IS A WORLD LEADER FOR LASTING PEACE. THIS IS THE THRILLING STORY OF OUR THIRTY-THIRD PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, HARRY S. TRUMAN...

ing from the battlefields of the South Pacific to his efforts as an attorney in Hot Springs. The obligatory panels pertaining to the humble origins and work ethic are also present. McMath fondly recalls the comic as a great boost to his campaign, and George Fisher remembers the McMath campaign ordering comic books by the truckload. Unlike the Crittenden County candidates, sequential art definitely helped McMath win his election bid.

As pointed out earlier, comic books suffered a damaging assault on their reputation in 1954, and the format lost considerable prestige, but scattered examples of newspaper sequential art can be found in later Arkansas political campaigns. The medium experienced a brief renaissance at Walnut Ridge in 1962. The *Times Dispatch* ran unsigned sequential art biographies of Sam Boyce, candidate for Attorney General, and Frank Holt, candidate for the supreme court; Boyce lost, Holt won.

In 1966 the only example of opponents for the same office using sequential art occurred in Pulaski County. Milas Hale and Dick Adkisson squared off for the sixth judicial district prosecutor's race. Adkisson's biography is obviously superior in style and content to Hale's, but it still took a runoff to settle the primary in Adkisson's favor.

Winthrop Rockefeller's second bid for office in 1968 resulted in an interesting twist to sequential art. The "Democrats for Rockefeller" published *Cranking Up the Old Machine,* which is really a throwback to the earliest comic books. Instead of a true sequential art biography, this booklet recycled thirty-eight old one-panel political cartoons from newspapers to firmly associate candidate Marion Crank with the Orval Faubus political organization. It used narrative text to tie the panels together.

As all of the examples examined in this essay should demonstrate, the effectiveness of political comics in Arkansas elections could not be proven one way or the other. Once television became the dominant medium for political advertising, the popularity of sequential art biographies waned. Instead of panels containing line drawings of the young candidate scoring at a basketball game or serving on the front lines, campaigners could now imitate television commercials to accomplish the same linking of politician with electorate values.

But television's gain has been our loss. Even though sequential art had a standard formula that monotonously repeated itself, these comics had the charm of humorous innocence that modern political campaigns seriously lack. It is as if sequential art biographies are saying "We candidates are people just like you, with the same backgrounds, the same ambitions, and the same ability to not take ourselves so seriously." Compare that cheerful willingness of self-caricature in the past to the grim "Willie Horton" style of contemporary political commercials. It is enough to make even Superman pine for the good old days.

Bibliography of Arkansas Political Sequential Art

Our definition and historical sketch of sequential art has been drawn from two reference works, *A History of the Comic Strip* by Pierre Coupre and Maurice Horn (New York: Crown Publishers, 1968) and *Comics as Culture* by M. Thomas Inge (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990). The following incomplete bibliography lists all of the Arkansas sequential art examples located to date. There are doubtless more waiting to be discovered, and ongoing bibliographic work such as that being done by the Arkansas Newspaper Project will help uncover more comics in the future. Not all of the comics listed here are campaign oriented. As previously indicated, the Herbert Hoover comic was produced while he was in office, the Jim Trimble comic is actually an obituary, the Nathan Gordon comic is a recap of the lieutenant governor's war exploits, and the most recent example, "Winthrop Rockefeller: A Republican Adventure," is from a sequential art history textbook.

"America's Fighting Heroes: The Story of Lt. Nathan Green Gordon, USNR." *American Armed Forces Features* (October 1961): 1.

"Elect Ike Murray Governor: Victory for the Man With A Program," (1952 campaign broadside).

Democrats for Rockefeller. *Cranking Up The Old Machine*. Camden: Hurley Press, 1968.

George Fisher. "The Life of James Bledsoe, Candidate for Sheriff and Collector." *The Arkansas News* (Earle and West Memphis), August 6, 1948, 3.

———. "The Story of Royce Upshaw." *The Arkansas News* (Earle and West Memphis), August 6, 1948, 2.

———. "The Story of Kinley Ray, Candidate for County Court Clerk." *The Arkansas News* (Earle and West Memphis), August 6, 1948, 3.

———. "The Story of Cliff Britton, Candidate for Tax Assessor." *The Arkansas News* (Earle and West Memphis), August 6, 1948, 4.

———. "The Story of Emmett Colvin, Candidate for Representative." *The Arkansas News* (Earle and West Memphis), August 6, 1948, 4.

———. "The Story of Edward Horton, Candidate for Representative." *The Arkansas News* (Earle and West Memphis), August 6, 1948, 5.

———. "The Story of Dana Sulcer, Candidate for County Treasurer." *The Arkansas News* (Earle and West Memphis) August 6, 1948, 5.

"Frank Holt." *Times Dispatch* (Walnut Ridge, July 26, 1962, B: 7.

Jim Guy Tucker Campaign News, (Spring 1972) 4.

"Jim McDaniel, Candidate for Congress." *Crittenden County Times* (West Memphis), July 23, 1948, 11.

"Judge Mike Todd for State Representative." (1986 campaign broadside).

Let's Keep Alford In Action In Arkansas. Little Rock: 1962. (small format comic book).

A Man Of Action. Little Rock: 1966. (small format comic book for Maurice "Footsie" Britt, candidate for Lieutenant Governor).

"Oren Harris, U.S. Congressman." (ca. 1946 campaign broadside).

"Pioneers of Power for the Farm: James W. Trimble." *Rural Arkansas*, (April 1972), 14.

"Richard B. "Dick" Adkisson." *Arkansas Gazette*, July 24, 1966, E: 27.

"Sam Boyce." *Times Dispatch* (Walnut Ridge), July 26, 1962, C: 2.

Satterfield. "Pictorial Life of Herbert Hoover." *Prairie Grove Herald*, August 30, 1928, 4.

The Story of Harry S. Truman. Washington, D.C.: Democratic National Committee, 1948.

The Story of Sid McMath. Little Rock, 1950.
"This is the Story of Milas Hale." *Arkansas Democrat*, July 17, 1966, A: 7.
Williams, C. Fred; Foy Lisenby and Jerry D. Poole, Ills., "Winthrop Rockefeller: A Republican Adventure." *Adventure Tales of Arkansas.* Little Rock: Signal Media Corp., 1988: 34.