

Bernie Lansky, editorial cartoonist, S.D. Union

Cartoonist Commentator

by Mary Lewis



Photo courtesy San Diego Union.

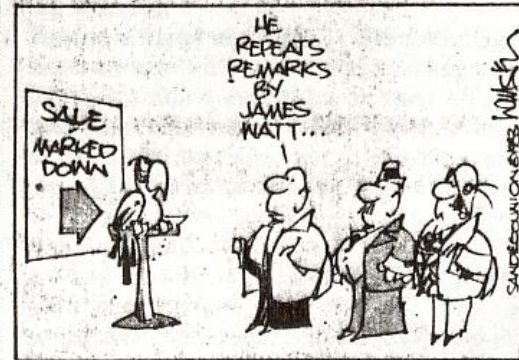
Bernie Lansky is a man at an ideal age — old enough to remember the good old days, and young enough to appreciate modern times. Lansky, whose cartoons brighten the editorial pages of the *San Diego Union*, surveys the glassy glitter of Mission Valley from his desk on the fourth floor of the Union-Tribune Building.

"Mission Valley was just bean fields and dairies when my family and I came here from Omaha in 1937," he recalls. "The paper was in a building across from Horton Plaza and followed the narrow, eight-column across style that was common at the time. Now, I'm delighted with the direction the *Union* has taken. We've evolved into the present with one of the finest publications in the business, and that is justified by our current clean, exciting format. The paper has never looked better."

Lansky's early days were spent on the staff of another local journal, *The Russ* of San Diego High School, where some of his youthful cartoon creations made their way from sketchpad pencil to newsprint ink.

"I always wanted to be a cartoonist, even before I was aware of it," he says. "I enjoyed work like Lichty's *Grin and Bear It* when I was a kid. I remember drawing on shirt cardboards with the darkest pencil I could find — an eyebrow pencil. They were so soft they didn't last long, but that was all I could get at the time."

Lansky was drafted into World War II the same day that he graduated from San Diego High. His postwar years saw him freelancing as a cartoonist both here and in Los Angeles,



but success in his field, in those days, beckoned from the other coast.

"The big syndicates, the ones putting out magazines like *Colliers*, *Look* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, were in New York," he says, "and that is where you had to go if you wanted to make contacts in the business. In '49, '50, '51, New York was exciting and still safe to get around. You could go through Central Park at 1:00 A.M. and not have to keep looking over your shoulder. I had a room in midtown Manhattan, but not much money. I soon learned that the automat was a good, cheap place to eat. I was sometimes down to my last nickel," he laughs, "but in those days the *New York Times* cost 3¢."

Also headquartered in New York is the National Cartoonists Society whose membership at the time included Milt Caniff, creator of *Terry and the Pirates*, Alex Raymond, of *Flash Gordon* fame, and Al Capp whose *L'il Abner* was at a peak of popularity. *L'il Abner*,

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"Dad, I'd like to ask you a question that requires a 'yes' answer!"

in the early 1950's, featured the Shmoo, a creature whose purpose in comic strip life was to benefit mankind. The Shmoo was a small, bowling pin shaped being who delighted in being eaten. Baked, boiled, fried or roasted, Shmoos were delicious. They were also loyal and affectionate — sort of a cross between a pet and a delicatessen.

"The Shmoo was so popular," Lansky says, "that people wanted spinoff products relating to it. There were Shmoo dolls, balloons, keychains, toys, paint sets and other items. *Newsweek* magazine reported Shmoo product sales of \$150,000,000. at that time. Capp needed people to oversee the licensing of the Shmoo products and that's what I got involved in, along with some other good people."

Lansky later returned to California to work on a strip he, and millions of other fans, had long enjoyed, George Mc Manus' *Bringing Up Father*.

"*Bringing Up Father*, which was also known as *Maggie and Jiggs*, was a hit because it accurately mirrored a segment of our population at the time," he says. "Jiggs was an immigrant, a hod carrier who became a success, but all he wanted was to pal around with the old gang at Dinty Moore's saloon. His wife, Maggie, wanted upward mobility and high society. When you saw Jiggs perched on an I-beam dangling from the end of a crane, you were seeing a reflection of the boom in skyscrapers going on then."

In 1956 Lansky sold his own comic panel creation to the Chicago Tribune — New York News Syndicate. Featuring a teenager called "Sheldon", Lansky's *Seventeen* ran worldwide for almost twenty years.

"Teenagers then, as now, were much aligned," he says. "But Sheldon was a nice kid who had normal, teen-parent problems."

At the same time, Universal Press Syndicate bought *Lansky's Look*, a cartoon, says its creator, with a topical theme. *Lansky's Look* also had a lengthy run in the syndicate-supplied newspapers.

LANSKY'S LOOK



"DO WE INCLUDE AMY'S TREE HOUSE IN LAST MONTH'S STATISTICS FOR HOUSING STARTS?!"

"Comic strips as we know them today are a peculiarly American invention dating back about 85 years. There are about a half-dozen top syndicates in the U.S. today as a result of mergers, much as in other businesses," Lansky says. "Readership is higher than ever with about 60,000,000 people reading the top comics like *Peanuts* or *Hagar*. Our comics are even popular overseas. In South America, for instance, *Dagwood* is known as *Lorenzo*, and in Denmark *Peanuts* is called *Radishes*."

Given the fact that, on election day, 45,000,000 Americans elect a president while 60,000,000 read *Dennis the Menace*, Lansky's statement about the importance of comics in our lives makes sense.

During his days at the drawing board as editorial cartoonist for the *Union*, a position he has held since 1976, Lansky says he has seen changes in both the formats and themes of American cartoons.

"To the detriment of the strips," he says, "cartoons have been shrinking in size. During the newsprint shortage of World War II comics were scaled down and never returned to the large newspaper space they once occupied."

Concerning theme changes Lansky says, "Cartoonists have much more latitude today. In the mid 1930's Ham Fisher did a sequence in *Joe Palooka* at the Oval Office with President Roosevelt and the most shown of the President was a sort of half-profile with his cigarette holder. There was not nearly the depiction of personalities that we have presently. Now there are virtually no taboos. You have people like Garry Trudeau of *Doonisbury*, which is now in hiatus, who uses everyone's actual name through his characters in a very topical manner."

Lansky says the ideas acted out by his rotund characters on the editorial pages of the *Union* come from; "Reading papers and magazines, watching T.V., and paying attention to what is going on in the world."

One fact of the cartoonist's life which remains constant, he says, is that the transition from original idea to finished rendition.

"Sometimes a good cartoon just seems to flow onto the paper," he says, "but more often I have to wring it out. Either way it's still fun as well as work." □