

Bernie Lansky; man of wit was a gifted, fun cartoonist

By Jack Williams

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For all the wit and technique that went into his innovative comic strips and editorial cartoons, Bernie Lansky felt he hadn't succeeded unless he made his work look easy. And fun.

Although it wasn't always easy, he once admitted in an interview, it never ceased to be fun.

His infectious smile – familiar to his colleagues at *The San Diego Union* for 16 years – reflected the joy of a self-trained artist whose vocation was his hobby.

"He had a special quality, a feeling for his life's work," said *Union-Tribune* columnist Don Freeman. "Bernie was a gifted cartoonist and a warm, vibrant person."

Mr. Lansky, who was diagnosed two years ago with Parkinson's disease, died Sunday at San Diego Hospice. He was 80.

In 1955, Mr. Lansky created one of the first comic strips targeting a teen audience. "Seventeen," as it was called, revolved around a teenage character, Sheldon, his parents, his girlfriend and a pal named Tank.

The strip, originally syndicated by Times-Mirror, reached an international audience and appeared in more than 100 American newspapers over the next two decades. In 1960, excerpts were released in book form.

Why a comic strip for teens? "There were 11 million of them spending \$16 billion a year," Mr. Lansky told an interviewer in 1970. "They were such a potent group and afraid of being maligned. This is a group I wanted to hit with the father-son relationship."

Although "Seventeen" reflected some his own youth at San Diego High School, he strove to be contemporary. "I can't go too far in ideas," he told the *Union* in 1960. "I might put running boards back on cars or something like that."

In 1964, a collection of his "Seventeen" cartoons were exhibited by the Fine Arts Gallery in Balboa Park.

At one point in the 1960s, Mr. Lansky was drawing two cartoons in syndication: "Seventeen" and "Kippy," a strip on which he collaborated with his brother, Jordan. "Kippy" was based on a child's perceptions of an adult world.

As much a fan of cartoons as a creator of them, Mr. Lansky had such a wealth of memorabilia and information at his command that he considered writing a book from a historian's perspective. "Everybody encouraged him to do it," said his son, Jason. "But he was too much into drawing instead of sitting and writing."

And he had a tough time tearing himself away from his daily quota of reading material. "He bought books like you couldn't believe and read four or five newspapers a day," his son said.

Mr. Lansky discontinued his "Seventeen" series in 1976 and joined the *Union* as editorial cartoonist. In a sense, it was a homecoming. His cartoons had been published in San Diego newspapers during his Army days during World War II.

One of them, published by the *Tribune-Sun* in May 1944, depicted the typical activities of a serviceman on leave based on his own informal survey.

Before retiring in 1992, when the *Union* merged with *The Tribune* to create *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, he also did illustrations for Copley Press publications and wrote book reviews.

In 1978, he created the friar logo for Mission Cable TV, a Cox Communications subsidiary, his son said.

Bernard Lansky was born in Omaha, Neb., and moved with his family to San Diego in 1937. He drew cartoons and was the humor editor for the *Russ*, San Diego High's school newspaper.

He also contributed eight pages of cartoons to his school yearbook, "The Gray Castle."

His small stature, maybe 5 feet 2, didn't discourage him from running track and wrestling for the Cavers. It also failed to prevent him from being drafted into the Army during World War II.

On the day he graduated in 1943, he received his draft notice. "We were leaving the ceremony and my mother handed me the mail that had come earlier that day," he told the *Union-Tribune* in 1993. "I looked around to see if maybe they'd been lurking in the ivy, waiting for me."

Once, on a leave from the Army, where he continued to polish his cartooning craft, Mr. Lansky met one of his idols – Ted Geisel of "Dr. Seuss" fame. At the time, Geisel was an Army captain attached to a Hollywood studio and making training films.

"I showed him my cartoons, and I'll never forget how kind he was to me, how helpful and generous," Mr. Lansky said.

Mr. Lansky went on to serve in the field artillery and take part in the pivotal Battle of the Bulge before returning to civilian life. "He had been promoted to a private first class," his son said, "but he was busted down to a private after one of his cartoons offended a captain."

Mr. Lansky returned to San Diego in November 1945 and began working as an independent cartoonist. To further his career, he moved to New York City in 1949 to join the staff of Al Capp, creator of the classic "Lil' Abner."

Cartoonist George McManus, creator of the "Bringing Up Father" series, recognized Mr. Lansky's skills and invited him to Los Angeles in 1952.

Three years later, Mr. Lansky sold his first comic panel, "Seventeen."

Survivors include sons, Jason and Loren, both of San Diego; and a granddaughter.

A memorial service is scheduled for 1:30 p.m. Dec. 21 at Glen Abbey Mortuary, Bonita. Donations are suggested to an indigent fund established by the National Cartoonist Society. Contributions should be sent to The Milt Gross Fund, in care of treasurer Larry Katzman, 101 Central Park West, New York, NY 10023.