

Issues of Originality and Ownership in Relationship to  
Elzie Crisler Segar's Popeye the Sailor Man

Stephen Smith

Elzie Crisler Segar's Popeye the Sailor Man is one of the most recognizable characters in American fiction. He was not the creation of one man but rather the product of a particular place, time and culture. Segar worked within an established tradition and was supported by the newspaper and film industries that depended on the approval of their intended audiences for survival. The newspaper comic strip was a relatively new phenomenon when Segar entered the field, the landscape had already been established and his contributions would not include inventing any new language or unique art form. What Segar did accomplish was to create a world of screwball comedy and engaging characters that satisfied the needs of the American public looking for escape from the hardships of the Great Depression. In 2008, with the widespread acceptance of postmodern art theory, it is redundant to speculate on whether or not comic strips are an art form. This is an issue only relevant to modernism. It was the high standards and professional competition along with the nurturing environment provided by industries that freed artists such as Segar from the burdens of business and allowed them to prosper. Segar's Popeye existed within two well-established genres and his adventures provided one of the primary themes for both the newspaper comic strip and the animated movie when these art forms reached a level of quality that has not been achieved since.

*Thimble Theatre*, the comic strip that Popeye was featured in, was originally published in William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal American*. Eventually it was syndicated to other newspapers through King Features, which Hearst also owned. William Randolph Hearst was the son of a self-made, California millionaire who made his fortune in mining and lumber. George Hearst acquired *The San Francisco Examiner* newspaper in 1880. Legend has it that the senior Hearst won the newspaper in a poker

game. Though this colorful anecdote is likely untrue it, along with other stories, has contributed to the mythologizing of George Hearst as an American archetype. Gerald McRaney portrays a fictionalized version of him in the HBO series *Deadwood*. One of the motivating factors in his acquisition of a newspaper was to give the Democratic Party a favorable voice in California. Though he had already been a member of the State Assembly from 1865 to 1866 his bid for governor of California two years after acquiring the *Examiner* was unsuccessful. The strategy of using his own newspaper's influence for personal political gain would be adopted much more effectively by his only child, William.

George Hearst married Phoebe Apperson, twenty-two years his junior, in 1862. Phoebe gave birth a year later to a healthy boy who would grow up to be one of the most powerful men in American history. William Randolph Hearst's influence is still strongly felt today. His grandson, George Hearst, Jr., is currently Chairman of the Board of Hearst Corporation, one of the world's largest privately owned companies. Wisely diversifying in times of slumping newspaper circulation Hearst Corporation owns over 200 magazine titles including *Esquire*, *Redbook*, *Popular Mechanics* and *Cosmopolitan* along with a number of television stations and channels such as ESPN, A&E and the History Channel. The corporation's internet ventures have been less successful. The top down approach established by the strong personalities of its founders has not translated well in a media where the most dynamic products have come from inspired individuals who needed little resources to compete with established media giants. Examples of questionable online ventures would be the backsliding Netscape and govWorks, which was the subject of the 2001 movie *Startup.com* about the shortsighted excesses that led to the collapse of the

internet bubble. Despite dubious recent investments, including XM radio, the backbone of William Randolph Hearst's business has always been print and includes King Features syndicate that distributes comic strips to over 5,000 newspapers around the world.

William Randolph Hearst was raised in privilege in San Francisco. He eventually ended up matriculating at Harvard where he majored in "jokes, pranks and sociability."<sup>1</sup> He was constantly in trouble and despite his keen intellect rarely put forth the effort to make decent grades. At Harvard Hearst was a member of the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity and the prestigious A. D. Club. He also wrote for the *Harvard Lampoon*. With his notorious behavior it was only a matter of time before Hearst was expelled from the university. There are conflicting reports as to why he was removed. The general belief is that it was because of his pranks that included having personalized chamber pots sent to all of his professors. More likely it was because of his poor grades though Hearst would always insist that it was political. After being removed from Harvard he returned to San Francisco and convinced his father to let him run the *Examiner*. Up to this point the newspaper was a money-losing vehicle for George Hearst's political agenda. To everyone's surprise, under William's stewardship as editor and publisher it began to thrive. Hearst's strategy was simply to move the editorial content away from parroting the talking points of the California Democratic Party and try to appeal to a more general audience. His father had already invested in the newspaper's production quality by buying the best equipment and now with William controlling the content circulation began to increase dramatically. Courting the white working class, anti-immigration and anti-government themes dominated the editorial. "While Hearst broke no new ground in

his racist diatribes against Asian immigrants unlike his competitors he took practical steps to demonstrate his commitment to 'white labor'.”<sup>2</sup>

Not satisfied with his success in San Francisco Hearst had dreams of moving into a larger market. After the death of his father he inherited, through the consent of his mother, half of the senior Hearst's enormous fortune. With plenty of capital and years of experience in the newspaper business he decided to buy the *New York Journal* and a German-language daily from John McLean for \$150,000. He marketed his venture aggressively and invested an additional \$250,000 in improving the quality of his new newspapers. He also lowered the price of the *Journal* to one penny to make it more appealing than its primary competition, Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, which was two cents. “Day after day, Hearst and his staff improved on their product. Their headlines were more provocative than anyone else's, their drawing's more lifelike; cartoons by Homer Davenport were sharply focused and brilliantly drawn.”<sup>3</sup> Though Davenport had no formal art training he had a natural gift and was very popular with his New York audience. Paid well by Hearst and politically connected Davenport received diplomatic permission from Theodore Roosevelt to travel to the Middle East where he subsequently met and befriended the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. Unwilling to be photographed the Sultan was pleased to have the talented and famous Davenport draw his portrait. One of the results of this trip was Davenport's bringing back to America 27 Arabian stallions whose offspring, known as the Davenport bloodlines, have had an immeasurable effect on the history of horse racing. Silverton, Oregon, Davenport's birthplace, has a large art festival the first weekend of August each year called Homer Davenport Days that features a political cartoon drawing contest.

Not having a large Asian-American population to lampoon and demonize Hearst's *Journal* focused its venom on African-Americans in a series of malevolent "darky" features while making sure not to insult New York's large European immigrant populations. Ironically one of Hearst's lasting contributions was his unwavering support of George Herriman, the light-skinned African-American creator of the comic strip *Krazy Kat*. Herriman was a Creole raised in New Orleans whose family left the South for California to avoid discrimination and oppressive Jim Crow laws. He always wore a hat to disguise his hair and was listed as a Caucasian on his death certificate. Whether Hearst knew or cared about Herriman's heritage is questionable. Hearst's willingness to sensationalize and exploit anything for his own advancement illustrates that his personal convictions were rather will-of-the-wisp. Yet his loyalty to Herriman and *Krazy Kat* were undeniable. Such a strange cartoon, with its limited appeal, was always threatened by editors who would have cut it if not for the insistence of Hearst that it remain in his newspaper. *Krazy Kat* always had, and still has, a loyal fan base among artists and intellectuals but Herriman's creation was commercially unviable and never would have survived in the free market. Indeed Herriman worked a regular 40-hour week at the *Journal* and first developed *Krazy Kat* as a sidebar for his more traditional comic strip, *The Dingbat Family*. The work that evolved was so unusual it appeared in the Arts and Literature section of the newspaper away from the other comics. In 1921 the composer John Alden Carpenter wrote a ballet, or "musical pantomime" about the strange, surreal comic strip.

Herriman was hired away from the rival *New York World* in 1896 along with another comic strip artist Richard Felton Outcault. Outcault's strip was called *Hogan's*

*Alley* and was wildly popular. Its most celebrated character was the Yellow Kid. Because of a legal dispute the *World* got to keep the name *Hogan's Alley*, which was continued briefly by another artist, George Luks. The result was that the Yellow Kid appeared in two newspapers simultaneously. It is commonly believed that *Hogan's Alley* was the first comic strip and Outcault the first comic artist. However according to the president of the National Foundation of Caricature and Cartoon art, Richard Marschall:

Outcault was not the first cartoonists to draw newspaper comic strips and the *Yellow Kid*...was not even a strip. Other "firsts" traditionally ascribed to the *Yellow Kid* are first titled character to appear every week and first cartoon series in color. The feature supposedly had its debut in 1896, a year that—because of faulty history—has assumed an almost holy status in comics chronologies. None of these widely accepted "facts" is true.<sup>4</sup>

What can't be denied is the popularity of the Yellow Kid as evidenced by the buzz created in New York and the increased circulation of the *World* when *Hogan's Alley* first appeared. Joseph Pulitzer capitalized on the comic strip and its main character with billboards, ads and posters on his delivery wagons. There was Yellow Kid merchandise including crackers, cigarettes, fans, buttons and even a Broadway musical. Outcault's drawings dominated the entire newspaper. One can imagine how Pulitzer must have been outraged when Hearst stole away his star cartoonist.

Before going to work for the *New York World* Outcault had produced technical drawings and illustrations for Thomas Edison. He traveled with the inventor to the Paris World's Fair in 1889 to work on the Edison's enormous presence at the exhibition.

Within the fifteen-acre *Palais des Machines* Edison had the largest display. It featured four hundred and ninety-three of his inventions. In Paris Outcault took the opportunity to study art on the Left Bank. One night Outcault was startled to hear a shadowy figure in the workshop attempting to sing opera. As an insight into his character the artist snuck up behind the singer and whacked him on the butt with a large ruler. Much to his chagrin this turned out to be Edison himself testing his phonograph. Later the famous inventor pulled the same prank on a sleeping Outcault. The artist said he would have framed the pants he was wearing but they were his only pair, which gives an idea as to the kind of wages one could have expected to receive from Edison. Nevertheless the artist and inventor formed a lasting friendship.

Though the popularity of the Yellow Kid was unprecedented it was short lived. If the appeal of Outcault's creation was that it showed New Yorkers as they saw themselves this was also what drew criticism. *Hogan's Alley* and the later strips in the *Journal* were crude and violent. "Respectable" readers and the clergy were outraged. The children represented in the cartoons were constantly being disrespectful and fighting. They caused no end of trouble and often shot spitballs, poked each other in the eyes, tortured animals and fell off fire escapes. Because of the sensationalist nature of both Pulitzer and Hearst's newspapers and the inescapable presence of the Yellow Kid, that type of muckraking became known as Yellow Kid journalism or yellow journalism. Within three years of Outcault's arrival libraries were refusing to subscribe to the *Journal*. Outcault returned to Pulitzer's *New York World* and later moved to the more prestigious *New York Herald* where he created the slightly more respectable *Buster Brown* comic strips. Like the Yellow Kid, *Buster Brown's* popularity was capitalized on through merchandising. Besides the

comic strips themselves the character's most lasting legacy has been its association with the shoe company that still bares his name. There was also a Broadway musical based on *Buster Brown* that was produced in 1905.

Outcault's creations were repeatedly the subject of court cases. Who owned the rights to these popular characters was often in dispute. Wherever he worked the artist might have been able to draw whatever he wanted but if someone else owned the name he was forbidden to use it. Outcault was paid to create these works and thus they were the property of whoever commissioned him. This would remain a continuing theme for other comic strip artists. Rudolph Dirks, the creator of the *Katzenjammer Kids* had a dispute with Hearst when he switched over to work for Pulitzer. The resulting court case gave Dirks the rights to the likenesses and names of the main characters and Hearst the name of the comic strip itself. Dirk continued his theme under the name *Captain and the Kids*. Inspired by the success of the Yellow Kid more artists began to enter the field. Though each had a unique vision, Outcault's influence is undeniable throughout the industry. From the surreal *Krazy Kat* to the hyper-realistic *Prince Valiant* and *Flash Gordon* there is a common aesthetic that held together well into the second half of the twentieth century. Part of this style is the continuing experimentation with composition and panel layout. Another is the masterful drawing skill of the participating artists. No doubt Outcault would have held his own against the French academic artists he studied with in Paris. Looking through the comic strips produced today few of the artists appear to possess the technical mastery of their predecessors.

Among these early comic strip innovators was George McManus who also worked for both Pulitzer's *World* and Hearst's *Journal*. McManus is best known for his

popular comic strip *Bringing up Father* that stayed in print for eighty-seven years until May of 2000. Like many of these early comic strips *Bringing up Father* also inspired several films, both live action and animated. Rube Goldberg was another artist who thrived in William Randolph Hearst's newspapers. The Rube Goldberg machine has become a mainstay of popular culture. These contraptions are imagined by the artist to be extremely complicated mechanisms designed to perform simple tasks. Notably the popular board game *Mouse Trap* is an example of a Rube Goldberg machine. In Chicago in 1906 and 1907 the *Sunday Tribune* published two comic strips called *The Kin-der-Kids* and *Wee Willie Winkie's World* by the German-American artist Lyonel Feininger. Feininger is better known as an influential cubist and expressionist painter who designed the cover for the 1919 Bauhaus manifesto. "Feininger's (comic) artwork clearly betrays the evolution toward cubism and abstraction, and his images are wonderful concoctions of angularity and distension."<sup>5</sup> As masterful as these early comic strip artists tended to be the one that is widely considered the pinnacle of the craft is Winsor McCay. According to Brian Walker in his book *The Comic Before 1945* "no cartoonist had ever surpassed his achievement."<sup>6</sup>

McCay is primarily remembered for the comic strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland* that was an evolution of his earlier *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend*. Both revolved around dream sequences and usually ended with the main character waking up or falling out of bed. In the case of *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend* the "fiend" would always lament eating Welsh rarebit, a rich cheese sauce that was believed to promote disturbed sleep and wild dreams. This motif allowed McCay to let his imagination run wild. The comic strip could include any subject and, since it was only a dream, didn't necessarily have to make sense

or follow any rational pattern. Still, in *Little Nemo*, McCay often included a simple plot. At first Nemo found himself being summoned by the King Morpheus of Slumberland to be the playmate of his daughter. Eventually he would find her and they would go off on a series of further adventures. Inspired by a flipbook that his son brought home, where a series of drawings seemed to move as the pages quickly changed one after another, McCay was inspired to create what many consider to be the first animated cartoon in 1911. Though animation was actually invented by a number of people working simultaneously with the advancement of technology, it is McCay's 1911 *Little Nemo* and the better-known *Gertie the Dinosaur* in 1914 that would inspire later artists as to what could be accomplished through this new medium. At this point animation was a laborious task. Each of McCay's animation cells was produced from an 8.5 inch by 6.5 inch piece of rice paper complete with shading and background. Hearst's gargantuan personality had trouble dealing with McCay's activities outside his newspaper business and soon used his contractual power to reign in his talented employee. "Newspaper color today cannot approach the subtleties of McCay's day (both metal engravings and the craftsmen who worked on them are virtually obsolete), and few cartoonists after McCay even attempted his pyrotechnics."<sup>7</sup>

Though most of the major newspaper business was centered in New York under the leadership of Hearst and Pulitzer, America's second city, Chicago, was producing a number of talented and creative artists. In addition to Lyonel Feininger Chicago would give Elzie Crisler Segar an opportunity to develop a unique style that would allow him to create one of the most beloved characters in the genre, Popeye the Sailor Man. Segar was born in Chester, Illinois in 1894. His "formal" art training consisted of mail-order lessons

from the W. L. Evans Correspondence Course in Cartooning. In 1916 Segar moved to Chicago and it has been repeatedly claimed that here Richard Felton Outcault helped him get a job drawing for the *Chicago Herald*. Like much of the history of the comic strip this story is questionable though at least one website, *Popeye's Poopdeck*, which is dedicated to Segar's early life and filled with considerable detail, confirms the event "although Outcault was not a resident of the city, and the paper was not his outlet."<sup>8</sup> Regardless, in 1916 the *Herald* struck a deal to publish a comic strip called *Charlie Chaplin's Comic Capers* based on the famous film icon. Segar was chosen to draw the strip that had a willing audience among Chaplin's many fans. Though competent, by the standards of the time Segar's first attempts at newspaper cartooning were amateurish compared to some of his contemporaries. The *Herald* also published the work of Frank Willard, who later drew *Moon Mullins* and whose style can be seen to have highly influenced Segar. Segar also created a comic strip called *Barry the Boob* at the *Herald* about a bumbling soldier in World War One. He was primarily concerned with slapstick comedy and jokes without the subtle moralizing or artistic experimentation found in the works of Herriman, Outcault or McCay. Because he focused on telling humorous stories and sight gags Segar's later work would be what most of his contemporaries weren't, genuinely funny.

Within a few years of his employment the *Herald* went bankrupt and was bought by William Randolph Hearst. Now Segar was working for the *Chicago American* and one of the most powerful men in the newspaper industry. While still in Chicago he developed a locally oriented comic strip called *Looping the Loop*. This same year Segar married Myrtle Johnson. *Looping the Loop* helped Segar develop his talents to a point that he attracted the attention of Hearst and his editor, Author Brisbane, who had the artist

transferred to New York. He was to replace Ed Wheelan, who had left the newspaper after having drawn a feature called *Midget Movies*. Segar continued to grow as an artist and his work became more detailed and accomplished. He started a comic strip called *Thimble Theatre* on December 19, 1919. The strip revolved around Olive Oil, her brother Caster Oil and her boyfriend Ham Gravy. In 1923 the character Caster Oil would acquire a rare Whiffle hen named Blizzard that possessed extraordinary strength that he would use to rig various gambling enterprises. Later another Whiffle Hen named Bernice would appear in the strip with more supernatural powers. When Castor rubbed the hen's head he could see the future, a trick he would also use to advance his gambling. When Popeye fist appeared in *Thimble Theatre* a decade later it was by rubbing the Whiffle Hen's head that he would gain his amazing strength, not by eating spinach as he did in later incarnations.

By 1926 Caster Oil was dominating the comic strip. In one of his adventures he schemed to travel to Dice Island where there was a casino that he planned to cheat with his magical Whiffle Hen. Castor traveled to the docks to hire some help in getting to the island and this is when Popeye the Sailor Man was first introduced into the *Thimble Theatre* storyline. Foreshadows of Popeye had come in the forms of two prizefighters that Caster Oil had gotten involved with. One was named Hogan and the other Battling (Bat) McGnat, each had much of Popeye's features and personality. When he was first introduced Popeye the Sailor Man also spent a considerable amount of time in the boxing ring winning money for the always-conniving Caster Oil. *Thimble Theatre* was only a mediocre success until the arrival of Popeye. Like *Krazy Kat* it was only the insistence of William Randolph Hearst that kept it in circulation. When the sailor man did arrive the

public took notice. More newspapers began to buy *Thimble Theatre* and merchandising soon followed. Since Hearst owned the rights to the character he would be the primary recipient of the millions of dollars that would be made by licensing out the images.

Popeye eventually became Olive Oil's love interest and her other boyfriends, including Ham Gravy, would be marginalized by the sailor man's popularity. J. Wellington Wimpy would be introduced in 1931 as Popeye's best friend and Bluto, the staple of post-Segar Popeye adventures, would only appear briefly in 1932 under the master's pen. Other memorable Segar creations would be Eugene the Jeep, a magical creature from the fifth dimension, Swee'Pea, Popeye's adopted baby who mysteriously arrived in a box on his doorstep in 1933, The Sea Hag and Alice the Goon. A disturbing fixture of many comic strips of this era, including *Thimble Theatre*, is the cruel stereotyped African-American drawn in the style of vaudeville blackface and the minstrel show that is now an archetype of American racism. This character would be adopted years later as a fixture of irony and social criticism by a number of artists including comic artists such as Robert Crumb and Will Eisner.

With the success of Popeye Segar found himself earning as much as \$100,000 a year at the height of the Great Depression. This was a time when popular culture tended toward escapism. *Thimble Theatre* became *Thimble Theatre starring Popeye* and the public voraciously consumed its zany storyline, slapstick humor and outrageous characters. Segar hit a perfect cord and never strayed from his formula. Arguably the height of the Popeye saga was an eight-month storyline from 1933 to 1934 entitled "Plunder Island." In this adventure the Sea Hag and Alice the Goon first appeared. "It

may be the finest example of pure comic strip narration...(Segar) based his humor on the interaction of one of the most inspired cast of comic characters this side of Dickens.”<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the newspaper comic strips Segar’s Popeye would play an important roll in the development of the animated film. Max and Dave Fleisher had already established themselves as leading innovators in the field by the time Popeye the Sailor Man made his debut in the *New York Journal* in 1929. Inspired by the success of Winsor McCay’s *Gertie the Dinosaur* the brothers began experimenting with animation. In 1916 they created their first work for producer J. R. Bray, who was under contract with Paramount Pictures. This first *Out of the Inkwell* cartoon would evolve into the brothers’ establishing their own studio called Out of the Inkwell Films, Inc. in 1921. Among the brothers’ many contributions to the medium would be the Rotoscope, a device used for tracing the movements of live actors, and the use of three-dimensional sets. Max acted as producer and the younger Dave directed. Paramount distributed the films, helped the Fleischers through hard times, and eventually took over the company and fired its founders.

After nine years of producing animated shorts the film company, now called Fleischer Studios, would hit a home run with the introduction of Betty Boop in the 1932 “talkie” *Minnie the Moocher*. Betty Boop was an overtly sexual flapper supposedly based on the singer Helene Kane. Kane sued Fleisher Studios and Paramount for \$250,000 in 1934 claiming that, “the problem was not that she looked like Betty Boop but that Betty Boop looked like her, sang like her, and, most important, used the phrase *Boop-oop-a-doop*, which Kane claimed to have invented.”<sup>10</sup> Though Betty Boop had appeared in earlier animations she didn’t become truly fleshed out until *Minnie the Moocher*. Before this she was a human-like dog with ears that now became earrings on a completely

human girl. With the introduction of the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays code, in 1930 the Fleischer brothers were “ordered to tame down her appearance—with her garter, short skirt and décolletage gone in later films after the mid-1930s—after which her popularity declined.”<sup>11</sup> Faced with the diminishment of their most popular character the studio would need to find another that moviegoers would flock to.

Popeye first appeared in the Betty Boop cartoon entitled *Popeye the Sailor Man* in 1933. It was here that his famous theme song would first be heard. The tune was written by Sammy Lerner and based on Gilbert and Sullivan’s “Oh better far to live than die . . . I am the Pirate King” from *The Pirates of Penzance*. In his book *Out of the Inkwell* Max Fleischer’s son and biographer, Richard Fleischer, writes about his impression of Popeye’s first screen appearance:

What surprised me then, at seventeen, and still surprises me today was that the Fleischer gang didn’t play this picture safe. They took chances that only loony animators would take. Near the opening of the picture, Popeye does a sort of hornpipe arm gesture of hiking up his trousers that reveals that he is wearing a tightly laced, old fashion corset that pinches in his waist and puffs out his chest making him look manly. A little later on he does a very unmanly, but very sexy, Hawaiian hula dance with a clearly topless Betty Boop.<sup>12</sup>

Later Fleischer Popeye ventures would be tamer and fall into the standard formula of Popeye saving Olive Oil from a dastardly Bluto by eating spinach and gaining enormous strength just when all hope seemed lost. Though masterfully executed the

animated adventures would lack the nuanced storytelling that was the hallmark of the Segar's comic strips. Fleischer Studios acquired the motion picture rights for Popeye from Hearst's King Features syndicate. Segar had no claim of ownership of his creation. He was a salaried employee and he worked at Hearst's discretion. The series proved to be extremely successful, "eventually, Popeye became more popular than even Mickey Mouse."<sup>13</sup> Betty Boop was phased out with her last cartoon being *Yip Yip Yippy* in 1939. During World War Two Popeye's outfit would change to a standard U.S. Navy uniform and the later comic strips, animated films and merchandising materials would reflect Max and Dave Fleischer's vision as much as Segar's.

William Costello, also known as "Red Pepper Sam" would provide the first voice of Popeye. Costello soon turned out to be a problem. "Success went to his head so fast it was ridiculous,"<sup>14</sup> remarked Mae Questel, the voice of Olive Oil. When Costello demanded vacation time right in the middle of production he was fired and quickly replaced by a Paramount affiliated drummer and then some fellow Dave Fleischer meet on the street. Finally Jack Mercer, a voice actor from a showbiz family, would be given the part that he would make his own. Mercer was a reliable worker who practiced hard to get the character's voice to his satisfaction. Much of the dialogue in the Fleischer Popeye cartoons was improvised, often to fit with the animation's lip movement. It was these garbled mumblings that gave the character the unique personality that would be lacking in later cartoons. Robin William's worked to imitate Mercer's style in the 1980 Robert Altman film *Popeye* and Mercer even had a small cameo appearance in the movie.

Fleisher Studio's was subject to a strike by its employees in 1937 and reacted by moving their operation to Florida and hiring non-union workers. The brother's borrowed

money from Paramount to finance the venture and this would result in them losing control and eventually being fired themselves within six years. Still, during this time some of the most well crafted animated movies in the history of the genre would come out of Fleisher Studios. Competition from their main rival, Disney, and improvements in technology would produce the much-underrated, full-length feature *Gulliver's Travels* and the universally acclaimed Superman animated series. The Popeye cartoons that would come after the Fleisher years would lack inspiration, as would the comic strips after Segar's untimely death of liver failure in 1938 at the age of 43. Arguably the only later artist to do justice to Segar's creation, which is still being produced today, was Bobby London who drew the strip from 1986-1992. London brought back the original character Caster Oil and pushed the envelope by dealing with contemporary issues like anorexia, real-estate takeovers and conflicts in Middle East. He poked fun at King Features licensing department and was finally fired over a series of strips called "Witch Hunt." In this episode Olive Oil receives a baby doll by mistake and is talking to Popeye about returning it. A priest overhears the conversation and thinks she is pregnant. Popeye and Olive Oil discuss her "right to choose." This was too much for King Features and London lost his job.

Few art forms can be created in a vacuum. Perhaps Outcault and Herriman could have become easel painters if they had lacked the supportive environment created by men like William Randolph Hearst. Lyonel Feininger was able to make this transition. But in the case of Elzie Crisler Segar, his creation would never have come to fruition if not for the backing of businessmen and the friendly competition that inspired him to continually improve his craft. Likewise it was the rivalry between Fleisher Studios and Disney that

compelled both to push their animated films to an extraordinary level of excellence. There is no doubt that drawing is an art form, but the drawings are not necessarily the finished product in the case of a comic strip and certainly not in the case of an animated film. Other people are needed. Other craftsmen applied the color that embellished Segar's work and skilled cameramen and printers were required to ensure a quality reproduction. It was the work of all of these people that the public responded to. Through the opportunity provided by William Randolph Hearst and the envelope pushing of Max and Dave Fleisher Popeye became one of America's most enduring cultural icons. Segar and his artistic contemporaries "created...fantastic world(s) made of words and pictures. They were the early masters of a great American art form."<sup>14</sup>

1. David Nasaw, *The Chief* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 43.
2. Ibid. 80.
3. Ibid. 102.
4. Richard Marschall, *America's Great Comic Strip Artists* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1997), 19.
5. Ibid. 86.
6. Brian Walker, *The Comics Before 1945* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2004), 56.
7. Marschall, *America's Great Comic Strip Artists*, 93.
8. Ibid. 122.
9. Bill Blackbeard and Martin Williams, ed., *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* (Washington, D.C.: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977), 184.
10. Richard Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 56.
11. Jeff Lenburg, *Who's Who in Animated Cartoons* (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2006), 90.
12. Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell*, 55.
13. Ibid. 55.
14. Brian Walker, "Every Picture Tells a Story," in *Cartoon America*, ed. Harry Katz (New York: Abrams, 2006), 161.