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DREAMS, AND DINOSAURS:
WINSOR MCCAY'S LIFE AND WORK

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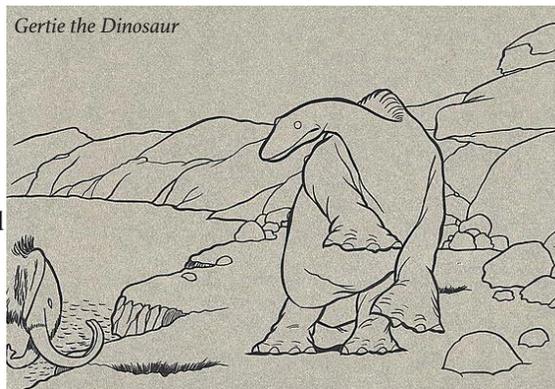


Winsor McCay 1906

By the early 1910s Winsor McCay, a Spring Lake native was looking to improve his vaudeville act. He was a well-known comic strip artist in the newspapers and audiences loved watching him draw on stage. The next step, he decided, was to animate his drawings. This was in the early days of the silent film era. Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton were filming a live-action short films in a single afternoon. Conversely, a minute of animated film required an artist like McCay to create at least 960 individual drawings. Even today it is easy for audiences to forget that every moment of an animated film has to be painstakingly produced by an artist. Early animators made their efforts known to the audience by inserting themselves into their work.

McCay's 1911 film based on his successful comic strip, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, began with a live-action scene of McCay meeting with friends and accepting a challenge to draw four thousand drawings in a month and animate them into a short film. The film shows the artist at work creating the drawings and setting them up to be photographed before finally showing the animated series in the last two minutes of the ten minute short. By showing the effort that went into producing those two minutes of animation, McCay showed his impressive talent for creating movement and perspective.

McCay introduced audiences to "Gertie", the trained dinosaur three years later. "Come out Gertie, and make a pretty bow," reads the title card of the silent film. Gertie, the playful and a little disobedient diplodocus emerges from her cave and walks towards the audience. On



the way she gets distracted, and eats a boulder and an entire tree. She is prompted to perform further tricks. She raises her right foot for the audience, but gets distracted by a sea serpent and does not respond to the command to raise her left foot. The title card scolds her for her disobedience and she begins to cry.

While McCay played the part of Gertie's master in the vaudeville performance of his film, McCay likely identified more with the dinosaur. Gertie, while clearly talented, is a captive forced to perform at the whims of her master. McCay was no captive, but he often felt the pressure to work hard to provide for his family and meet the demands of his boss, William Randolph Hearst. Likewise, his efforts to show the hard work behind creating *Little Nemo in Slumberland* reveal McCay's desire for his work to be appreciated

GROWING UP IN SPRING LAKE

Winsor Zenas McCay was born on September 26th that much is certain. The year of McCay's birth is subject to debate since there are no birth records and the man himself shifted his age several times in his life. With the use of census records, historian Kevin Scott Collier, places McCay's birth in 1867. He was born to parents Robert and Janet McCay and named after a family friend and employer, Zenas Winsor. They lived in a house next to First Baptist Church on the corner of Meridian and Tolford Street in Spring Lake.



Winsor McCay Family

McCay's first foray into art was a response to tragedy. Wildfires swept through Chicago and across the state of Michigan on October 8, 1871 destroying a large number of homes and property including the McCay home. A friendly neighbor rescued the McCay family and gave them shelter.

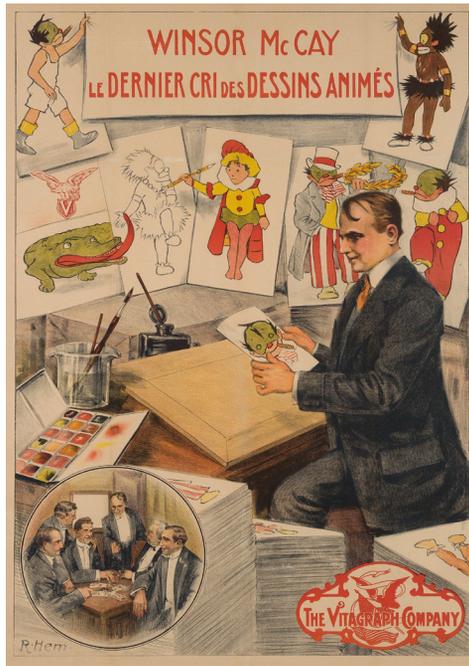
It was here that Winsor is said to have picked up a nail lying on the windowsill and etched the image of his burning home into the glass. This story belongs more to the realm of legend than fact, but it rings true to McCay's uncanny ability to quickly and faithfully render an image of a tragic event.

Once he started drawing, it seemed he never stopped. "I drew alone to please myself," he wrote. "I never

cared at all whether anyone else liked my drawings, nor did I get discouraged if I made a bad one. I never saved my drawings. I would give them away if anybody wanted them or would throw them away. I drew on fences, blackboards in school, old scraps

of paper, slates, sides of barns—I just couldn't stop." Some say that McCay's use of ephemeral media like fences and blackboards foreshadows his use of newspaper comics as his main art form.

One such blackboard drawing that likewise lives on in local legend depicts another tragedy. In the early hours of October 16, 1880, a passenger ship named the *Alpena* was crossing Lake Michigan having departed from Grand Haven when it was hit by large waves caused by the "worst gale in Lake Michigan recorded history." The ship capsized and broke apart, killing 80 people all on board. Winsor McCay, who was about 13 at the time imagined the scene in a drawing on the blackboard of his classroom in Spring Lake High School. The drawing showed the passenger ship being tossed around the high waves, with passengers in the water clinging to debris and loose cargo for dear life. Such a dynamic appearance caught the attention of a photographer who captured an image of the drawing.



EARLY CAREER AND MARRIAGE

Though Robert McCay recognized his son's artistic talent, he saw a career in business being more profitable and sent Winsor to Cleary's Business College in Ypsilanti in 1886. Winsor resented this and later said, "My parents had no more idea that I should be drawing funny pictures than they did that I should fly to the moon. I don't believe they had an idea that I would amount to anything in particular."

McCay attended the school, but spent a great deal of time in Detroit at vaudeville shows practicing his drawing skills. He studied art briefly under Professor John Goodison at Eastern Michigan University in 1888, though he never formally enrolled. It was the only formal art education he ever received.

In 1889 McCay moved to Chicago where he intended to enroll in the Art Institute of Chicago. Instead, he found employment at the National Printing and Engraving Company where he served as an apprentice designing posters for traveling circuses. It is likely that this experience influenced some of his later fantastical style. In 1891, McCay moved to Cincinnati to work for the Vine Street Dime Museum, a sideshow with attractions including a "dog-faced boy" and a "bearded lady." It was here that he met his wife.

Maude Leonore Dufour visited the Dime Museum with her sisters one day in 1891 to find Winsor McCay painting at his easel. Enjoying the tune of the polka wafting in from the auditorium, McCay swayed to the music and "executed a clumsy pirouette." His antics caught the attention of Maude, who laughed. McCay was struck by her beauty and rushed upstairs to change into a clean, tailored suit before seeking her out in the halls of the museum to introduce himself. They eloped a short time later. He was 24, she was 14. It was an uncomfortable age gap even in that time, and Winsor tried to disguise it by lying about his age.

Their relationship would prove to be tumultuous. Maude dreaded growing old and spent a great deal of time and money hiding signs of aging. Her spending put a strain on Winsor who had to work hard to keep the family solvent. Winsor loved Maude, but resented the expectations of domestic life. He missed the carefree bachelor lifestyle and was devoted to his work, leaving little time at home. Nevertheless the couple had two children, Robert and Marion.

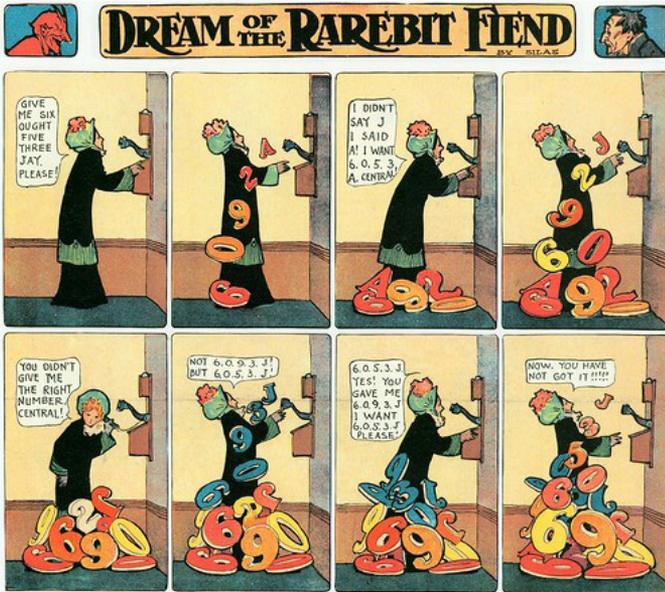


Winsor McCay (right)

It was clear from an early age that Winsor McCay was a talented artist. His family marveled at his ability to capture minute details from memory. His father, Robert once said, "His work was true, even when he was a youngster. One day he drew a picture of a sleigh-load of logs. He got every bolt head on the side represented in its proper place in the picture, and he didn't count them either. He just stood off a way from the sleigh and drew them. He even had the owner's markings on the ends of the logs." Winsor McCay called this technique "memory sketching."



Mrs. Winsor McCay



flying. Usually the final panel would feature Sammy getting physically kicked out of the establishment he had just disrupted.

This series showed that children could be an effective vehicle for humor while confirming the norm that they should be seen but not heard. The sneeze was humorous because it usually disrupted important adult business. By framing it from Sammy's perspective however, McCay appears to sympathize with the child's point of view.

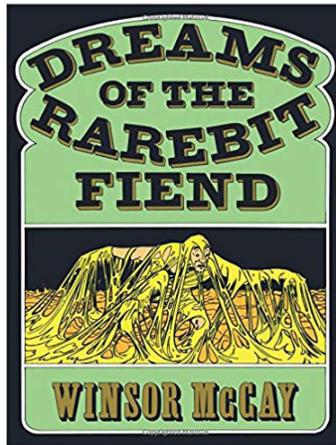
McCay found comic strips to be an ideal format to express his fantastical style and knack for world-building. The situations in *Little Sammy Sneeze* were unusual, but still rooted in some sense of reality. His next venture allowed McCay to further stretch the limits of his imagination.

Dream of the Rarebit Fiend first appeared in the *New York Herald* on September 10, 1904 and ran continuously through 1911 and again in 1913. In each episode, a different

character (most of whom were adults) would wake up in the final panel from a strange dream, blaming it on the consumption of a heavy meal such as Welsh rarebit: a Welsh savory sauce made primarily of melted cheese served over toasted bread. (Though also known as Welsh rabbit, the dish contains no rabbit meat) This premise was based on the commonly held belief that consuming a heavy meal of cheese before bed would cause strange dreams. The comic strip, though humorous at times, also tackled decidedly adult themes of marriage, death, and psychological distress.

LITTLE NEMO AND THE RAREBIT FIEND

In 1903 the McCay family moved to New York City where Winsor took a position at the *New York Herald* drawing in a relatively new format: comic strips. Historians credit Richard Outcault as the creator of the first "true" comic strip in 1895 with his series, *The Yellow Kid*. It featured characters speaking to each other through speech bubbles in a defined series of panels creating a narrative about a street urchin dressed in a yellow gown. McCay would soon perfect the medium and use his knowledge to literally and figuratively push the boundaries of the comic strip panel.

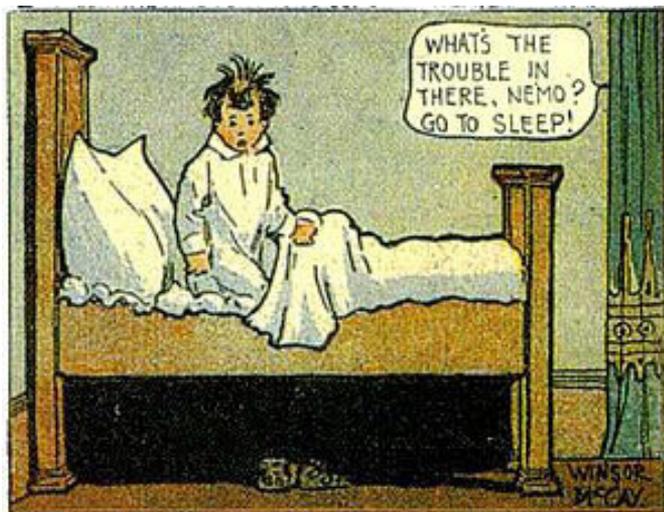


An early series called *Little Sammy Sneeze* debuted in July of 1904. It centered on a little boy named Sammy who tended to sneeze violently at inopportune moments. Anticipation would build through the first few panels as the audience saw Sammy's nose twitch. In the penultimate panel, Sammy would let out the sneeze, startling those around him and sending fragile objects, animals, etc.

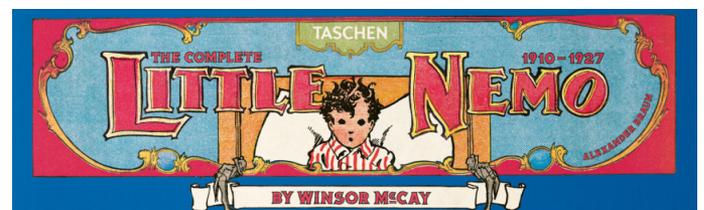


A character named "Little Nemo" first appeared in the December 10, 1904 episode of *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*. Later that year McCay gave the character his own spinoff series called *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. Unlike *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*,

Little Nemo in Slumberland was a serialized narrative that followed the character Little Nemo through his adventure through the kingdom of Slumberland in search of King Morpheus. At the end of each episode, Nemo awoke in his bed, but would continue on his journey in the following episode. Winsor based the look of the Nemo on his son, Robert, who often posed for promotional photos dressed as the character.



Little Nemo



RACIST STEREOTYPES IN LITTLE NEMO

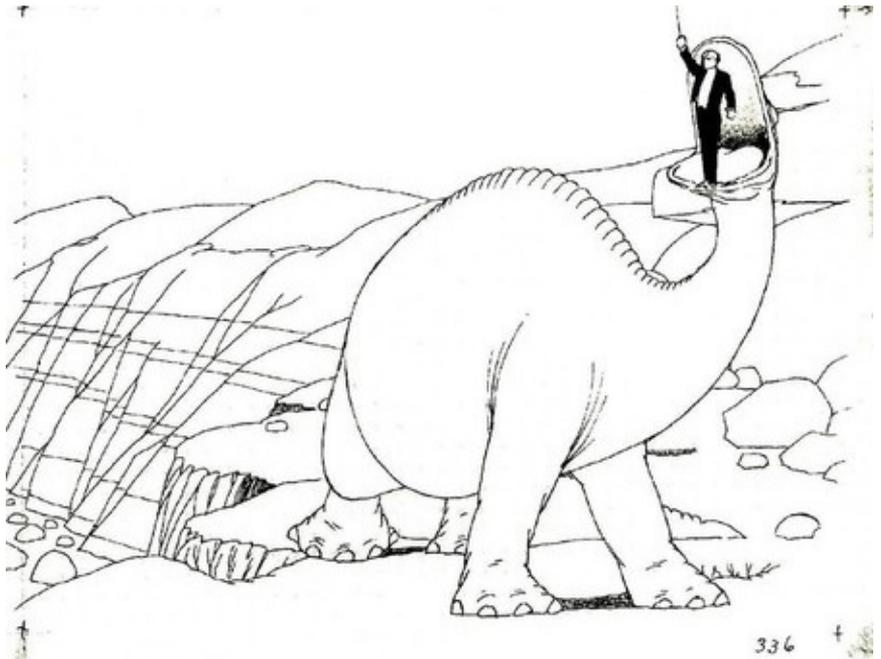
Nemo was accompanied in his journey through Slumberland by a host of recurring characters. The first was a cigar smoking clown dressed in green named, “Flip”. At first, Flip was untrustworthy; frequently getting Nemo into trouble. He later became a good friend. Later in the series, a character referred to either as “Imp” or “Impie” was introduced when Flip “brought him back from the Canary Islands.”

McCay’s first portrayal of the Imp was in his first ever comic series, *A Tale of the Jungle Imps by Felix Fiddle*, where a group of African “Imps” terrorized an animal until wise monkeys helped the animal adapt to become immune to the Imps’ pestering. The word “Imp” refers to a small demon, or sprite, and is always associated with mischief. The Imps are portrayed as indigenous African males through the lens of an exaggerated racist stereotype. They have large eyes with tiny pupils, spikey black hair that mimics the texture of their grass skirts, and large mouths ringed in thick lips. Their appearance differs dramatically from McCay’s drawings of white characters who have small eyes and lips resembling the human form in a more naturalistic way.

This is not to say that Winsor McCay was necessarily more racist than the average white American at his time. These caricatures were ubiquitous in the 20th century through minstrel shows and picanniny caricatures and became a shorthand for artists and creators throughout this time. It is however, important to point out the presence of these offensive images and understand how they helped to create and reinforce a cycle of racism in this country.

VAUDEVILLE AND ANIMATION

In 1906, McCay began performing in vaudeville shows doing chalk lightning sketches. He had a flair for performing, and a talent for drawing quickly and accurately. McCay enjoyed performing for audiences and innovated his act to keep them coming back. It was for his vaudeville act that McCay began creating animated short films. In 1911 and 1912, McCay brought to life his two most beloved comic strips. In the short “Little Nemo,” (1911), he animates the characters Flip, Impie, and Nemo to perform a dance. In “How a Mosquito Operates,” (1912) McCay depicted one episode of *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* where an anthropomorphized mosquito goes about the business of extracting blood from an unsuspecting sleeping man until he is too full to fly away.



Gertie holds McCay in her mouth

In 1914 McCay released his masterpiece, *Gertie the Dinosaur*. He performed alongside the film as Gertie’s master, cracking a whip as he gave commands to Gertie. Towards the end of the film he disappeared from the stage only to appear in cartoon form on the screen where he climbed into Gertie’s open mouth and waved to the audience. The film was one of the first to utilize the new technique of “cel animation” where artists would draw the foreground and background on transparent celluloid sheets that would later be layered and photographed as one frame of film. McCay’s work on *Gertie the Dinosaur* and his other films cemented his position as one of the fathers of animation.

LATER CAREER AND LEGACY

It was around this time that McCay left the *New York Herald* to work for newspaper titan William Randolph Hearst. Through the transition, McCay fought to maintain ownership of his comic, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. The *Herald* relented, but paid him only one symbolic dollar. Though McCay was already a prolific artist, Hearst pushed him to work harder. This must have made McCay feel a bit like Gertie, crying because she did not want to perform on cue.

In addition to his humorous comic strips, McCay began producing editorial cartoons to accompany inflammatory editorial columns leading up to the United States’ involvement in the First World War. In a film that harkened back to McCay’s childhood in Spring Lake, McCay depicted in near real-time precision, the sinking of the *Lusitania*. The *RMS Lusitania* was crossing the Atlantic from New York to Liverpool when, on May 7, 1915, it was struck by a torpedo fired by a German U-boat. The ship sank in less than 20 minutes, killing 1,198 passengers and crew, 128 of which were Americans. The tragedy of the

Lusitania might have reminded McCay of the sinking of the *Alpena*. In an echo of one of his earliest artistic endeavors, McCay paid tribute to the loss by drawing a memorial image of the tragedy. McCay's son Robert served in the war and survived, returning home with "shell shock," or what we would now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

McCay continued to produce editorial cartoons, comic strips, and animated films right up until his death in 1934. His work was somewhat hampered by the pressures placed on him by William Randolph Hearst and his former employer, the *Herald*. His last editorial cartoon was published four days before his death on July 26, 1934 of a cerebral hemorrhage.

Much of Winsor McCay's art survives thanks to his son Robert who donated much of his father's work to collectors and paid to have his films preserved in 1947. *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, *How a Mosquito Operates*, and *Gertie the Dinosaur* are all available for viewing on YouTube and much of his work in comic strips is preserved in books and online. Walt Disney summarized McCay's legacy in the field of comics and animation when he told Robert McCay who was visiting the Disney studio, "Bob, all this should be your father's."

Like any historical figure, McCay's legacy is complicated. He was a hardworking man who loved his family, even if he was not always there for them. His art reflects a love and respect for the imagination of children alongside images of racial stereotypes. Overall McCay had an incredible talent for drawing and an impressive ability for innovating the field of comics and animation. Spring Lake honors the artistic legacy of McCay with an historical marker and a Winsor McCay Day every June hosted by the Spring Lake District Library. This event features a cartooning workshop for children.



The sinking of the Lusitania



Actors Benefit for Crippled Children, Winsor McCay sketching 1908

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