

Imagine: Li'l Abner in Washington Today

*By Irv Sternberg*

A New York mayor read them to children on the radio every Sunday morning. Some mimicked real people. They offered a daily respite from the dark days of the Depression, and were part of my life in the thirties and forties.

My favorite comic strips as a child growing up in that period were 'Li'l Abner,' 'Prince Valiant,' 'Dick Tracy,' 'Blondie,' and 'Rex Morgan, MD.' Some can still be read in certain newspapers, a testimonial to their popularity over the decades.

I've always favored cartoons that featured quirky characters in uncluttered drawings and told funny or exciting stories in a crisp style.

I was amused by Li'l Abner and his friends in hillbilly country, by the well-told adventures and beautifully drawn panels of 'Prince Valiant' in the days of King Arthur, and by tough, square-jawed Dick Tracy who introduced the two-way radio wristwatch and the police procedural genre to the comic strips.

Now, in the winter of my life, I still read the comics. My current favorites are 'Pickles,' 'Zits,' 'Pluggers,' 'Luann,' and 'Beetle Bailey.' I like 'Pickles' and 'Pluggers' because the writers seem to be eavesdropping on my life. In 'Pickles,' I relate to his characters, Earl and Opal. I recognize the oddball situations and sometimes testy conversation between these two old-timers. 'Pluggers' seems to be based on hilarious situations too close for comfort. 'Zits' is about a self-centered, self-indulgent teenager whose behavior is so outrageous I'm just grateful he's not mine.

But my all-time favorite cartoon was 'Li'l Abner.' And for good reason. I recently researched its history and realize why I was drawn to this strip at an early age. Created and drawn by Al Capp, the comic strip is now regarded by many as the greatest of all time.

Capp was born Alfred Gerald Caplin in New Haven, Connecticut. He lost his left leg in a trolley accident when he was nine. His artistic father encouraged him to take up cartooning, and at 19, he became the youngest syndicated cartoonist in America with a strip called 'Colonel Gilfeather.' After a few years, he became bored with it and introduced 'Li'l Abner,' surrounded by characters like Daisy May, the busty blonde in an off-the-shoulder, polka-dotted blouse; capitalist General Bullmoose; bad-luck Joe Bfstplk, who was always followed by a dark cloud hanging overhead, Mammy Yokum and the beautiful but odorous Moonbeam McSwine, who preferred the company of pigs to men.

The cartoon inspired Sadie Hawkins Day across the nation, when unattached young women could pursue the young men of their desires.

Capp's status went beyond that of a cartoonist. He was a guest lecturer at campuses across the nation, and a frequent guest on shows hosted by Jack Paar, Steve Allen and Johnny Carson. His admirers included actor/director Charley Chaplin, writers John Updike and John Steinbeck, and economist John Kenneth Galbraith. He authored a newspaper column and hosted his own radio show.

Capp retired the strip in 1977 and died two years later. 'Li'l Abner' will always be remembered as the best in cartoon art and social satire. I wonder how he would've handled the tragic comedy unfolding in Washington today.