

American Entertainment: Animation and Humor

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J. Stuart Blackton: Father of American Animation

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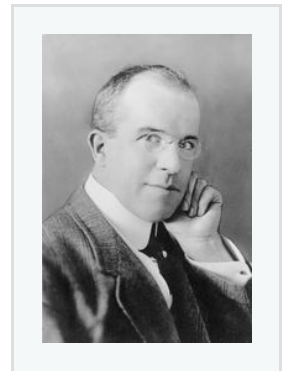


a scene from Stuart Blackton's "The Enchanted Drawing"

American animation owes its beginnings to J. Stuart Blackton, a British filmmaker who created the first animated film in America. Before creating cartoons, Blackton was a vaudeville performer known as "The Komikal Kartoontist." In his act, he drew "lightning sketches" or high-speed drawings. In 1895, he met Thomas Edison. . . .

After meeting Edison, Blackton became interested in putting his drawings on film. He and Albert E. Smith formed one of the first film studios, the Vitagraph Company. They

made a series of "trick films," using techniques including stop motion (stopping and starting the camera while making a change in the scene being filmed), dissolves (the first scene slowly fades out at the same time that a second scene slowly fades in), and multiple exposures (filming one image, then rewinding the film and shooting a second image) to achieve what they called "magical effects." (Today we call them special effects.) Blackton's first creation, combining drawings and film, was "The Enchanted Drawing." Using the trick film techniques he and Smith developed, the drawing magically comes alive!



a portrait of J. Stuart Blackton from 1912



a scene from "Humorous Phases of Funny Faces" from 1906

Six years after creating "The Enchanted Drawing," Blackton made "Humorous Phases of Funny Faces," a film in which you see an artist's hand draw faces and figures that begin to move. Take a look [at the film] and see what kind of film techniques you recognize. How much has animated film changed? Although today we remember Blackton for creating the earliest cartoons, his main work was making dramatic films with actors. . . .

The Nuts and Bolts of Animation

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Some of the earliest cartoons were made with flipbooks, which contained images in sequence, flipped by the viewer to simulate movement. You can make a "cartoon" like this yourself by using a pad of paper and drawing a stick figure "walking" across the bottom edge of the paper. . . .



starting up a cold car – with dynamite!

Today, animated films are made with individual sequential drawings on paper or on clear plastic (celluloid) sheets called cels, which are then filmed by a camera. When the individual cels are projected very fast on a screen, they look like a continuous moving drawing.



an early cartoon about running away from home

Animated films can also be created on computers using special software. If you've watched cartoons . . . you've probably seen cartoons made using both methods. Animated films such as *Shrek* or *Finding Nemo* were made with computers. *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast* were made with cels. . . .

To make an eight- minute cartoon with drawings, you would need: 7,000 sheets of paper or 7,000 sheets of celluloid, 150 sheets of cardboard on which to paint backgrounds, 50 felt- tip pens, 10 quill pens, 50 pencils, five erasers, 20 brushes, 2.5 gallons of paint, 1/2 pint of ink, 3,600 feet of black- and- white film to film the preliminary "pencil test," and 720 feet of color film to film the final cartoon. You also need a staff of writers to write a script; artists and animators; a director (just like you do for a movie); voice actors to play the various roles; musicians; sound and camera equipment; and a great deal of time and energy! . . .

Krazy Kat and Other Cartoon Characters

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In the 1910s and 1920s cartoon characters, often based on comic strip characters, were becoming more common. Invented by cartoonist George Herriman, Krazy Kat was one of the most popular comic strip heroes. Krazy Kat starred in animated shorts that also featured Ignatz Mouse and Offissa Pupp. Krazy Kat was hopelessly in love with Ignatz Mouse, and was always happy to get any attention he could from Ignatz, even if it meant being the target of flying bricks. In [one] comic strip, Krazy Kat makes a pie that triggers all kinds of trouble....

Tom and Jerry are a lot like modern-day versions of Krazy Kat and Ignatz Mouse. The plots of Krazy Kat comics were always very similar -- Krazy Kat was in love with Ignatz Mouse who simply threw bricks at Krazy; Offissa Pupp was in love with Krazy and often threw Ignatz in jail. [In the film “Krazy Kat Goes A-Wooing”], Krazy Kat serenades Ignatz, but is met by flying bricks.



a scene from "Krazy Kat and Ignatz Mouse at the Circus"

Krazy Kat was just the beginning of the trend toward animal heroes in animation. In the 1920s, Felix the Cat was introduced, and he was the most famous cartoon personality until Walt Disney introduced Mickey Mouse in 1928. Today, Mickey Mouse is known around the world. . .

a scene from "Krazy Kat Goes A-Wooing"

Three Early Cartoonist Filmmakers

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In the years following the very earliest animation, cartoonists and filmmakers developed several ways to give fictional characters movement. Individual artists had their own unique style of animation.

One early pioneer of cartoon films was Winsor McCay, who was from Spring Lake, Michigan. McCay worked as a cartoonist for several newspapers. He turned his comic strip hero, Little Nemo, into the subject of a highly successful animated film. After that, he made many more short cartoons including "Gertie the Dinosaur." In this film, Gertie, who lives in the modern world, encounters a train and dreams of being the life of the party.



a scene from "Gertie on Tour" from 1921

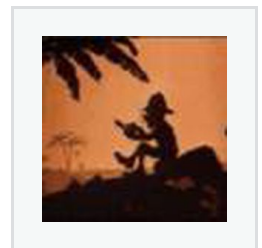


a scene from "The Dinosaur and the Missing Link, A Prehistoric Tragedy" from 1917

Willis H. O'Brien was also a cartoonist before he turned to filmmaking. He created figures from a type of flexible rubber called india rubber for his films animated with puppets. These films were an early form of "claymation" (a style of animation using clay figures). O'Brien created one of the most famous animated figures of all time -- King Kong. In [the] film, "The Dinosaur and the Missing Link," made 16 years before "King Kong," a giant ape-like character is the villain. It's interesting to see that almost from the beginning of animation, cartoonists were intrigued by prehistoric animals. . . .

The Flintstones [is] a more recent example of a cartoon based on prehistoric times, but as you can see, the theme started years ago.

Tony Sarg was an illustrator and a puppeteer who created a kind of animation that is not done with drawings, but with a frame-by-frame filming of a silhouette marionette (a puppet with jointed limbs that are moved with strings). [In a film] called "The First Circus," Sarg and co-animator Herbert M. Dawley imagined what a prehistoric circus might be like.



a scene from "The First Circus" from 1921

Humor

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“Humor is a universal language.”

– Joel Goodman

“With the fearful strain that is on me night and day, if I did not laugh I should die.”

– Abraham Lincoln

Today, we find humor from many sources. TV, movies, books, radio, and the Internet are just some of the mediums used to offer comedy. But at the turn of the 20th century, the most common way to enjoy humor was to attend a vaudeville show, a variety show that might include comedians, dancers, singers, performing animals, acrobats, and magicians. Much of today's humor evolved from vaudeville, which began to decline in popularity after 1932. It was at that time that the leading vaudeville theater, the Palace Theater in New York, replaced live acts with film.

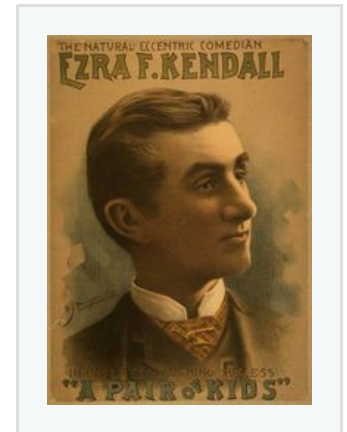


the 1916 program for the musical The Century Girl

Vaudeville Comedians

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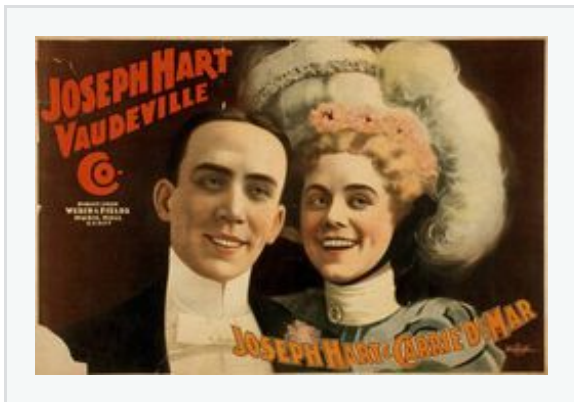
What do you think of as humorous? A stand-up comedian? A TV commercial? A typical vaudeville show had eight to 14 acts, or "turns," and included a little bit of everything. Magic segments, musical numbers, dance numbers, combination song-and-dance acts, acrobatics, juggling, comic routines, animal acts, celebrity cameos, and appearances by unsavory characters all had their place in a vaudeville (also called "variety") show. Comic monologues by performers, such as Ezra Kendall . . . , were especially popular. A few performers became well known for their acts.



Like Ezra Kendall, Fred Duprez was a popular vaudevillian famous for his comic monologues. In [one] recording, you can hear how Duprez used music to help tell a story. . . .

performer Ezra F. Kendall, often called the "natural eccentric comedian"

"Duprez invented all this himself and has given it before many audiences. It is really very cleverly worked out . . ." This is how the Edison record catalog from around 1927 described the Desperate Desmond routine, adding, "If you can't laugh at this, see a doctor."



a poster of the Vaudeville team, Joseph Hart and Carrie DeMar from 1899

Vaudeville teams doing comic routines were also popular. Joseph Hart and Carrie DeMar . . . were one popular act, and Sally Stembler and Edward Meeker were another.

Have you ever laughed so hard you just couldn't stop? In [one] recording, Sally Stembler, as Lena, plays the piano and has a hard time controlling her laughter while Henry has a music lesson with the professor (played by Edward Meeker). Stembler was known as the "laughing girl," and this comic sketch was so popular that nearly every early record company sold a recording of it.

Some comedy routines become classics. Meetings between "country bumpkins" and "city slickers"

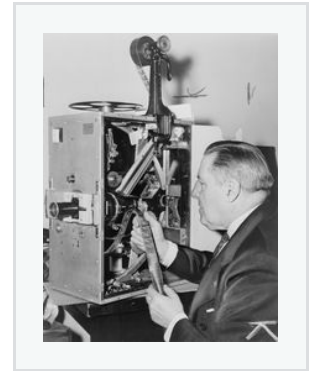
provided lots of material for jokes, and became a classic comedy routine. One popular sketch was called "The Arkansas Traveler." It was inspired by an 1852 print that showed a wisecracking, fiddle-player meeting a sophisticated city person. Dramatized, this kind of humorous sketch often included sound effects and music. . . .

"Billy" Bitzer Films Stealing a Dinner

The text is from "America's Story from America's Library" by the Library of Congress.

If you wanted to see a movie back in 1899, you could go see the short film *Stealing a Dinner*, filmed on . . . April 28, 1899, by cameraman G.W. "Billy" Bitzer. The comedy featured Professor Leonidas and his troupe of dogs and cats. This is the story:

One of the dogs steals Professor Leonidas's dinner from the table when he leaves. In order to cover up his crime, the dog places a cat on the table. The professor finds the cat and in a rage shoots her (not for real, of course), but is promptly arrested by a large dog dressed in policeman's clothes.



Billy Bitzer in front of a film projector



a boy looking into a mutoscope

This short comedy was one of the first motion pictures filmed by Bitzer for the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. The mutoscope was a peephole motion picture device run by hand. The frames for the mutoscope were on cards (instead of film) — mounted on a rotating drum. When turned very quickly, it created the illusion of movement. Have you ever drawn pictures on the corner of a pad of paper and flipped through it quickly? The pictures seem to move! That was the basis of these early movies, until the projector came along and changed everything.

Imitations

The text and image are from “America’s Story from America’s Library” by the Library of Congress.

Can you imitate any sounds? Can you mimic the way a parent or a friend talks? Impressions were a common form of entertainment and a great source of comic material for many comedians. When people didn't have radio, TV, or movies, it was popular to imitate animals or machines. John Orren was a well-known mimic on the vaudeville circuit who worked with his partner, Lillian Drew. . . .

How old do you think most mimics were? . . . Although some mimics were adult professionals and made a living performing, some youngsters did imitations just for fun. Donald Leach was an amateur mimic whose specialty was imitating animals. He was just six years old when he made [a] recording The sounds he mimicked were probably things he heard frequently. . . .

Have you ever heard a dog and a cat fight? [If you can listen to Lawrence Evans’s impression], see if you can tell the difference between the real thing and [his] impression. He performs both roles. . . .



Some mimics were so good it was hard to tell the difference between an imitation of a train whistle and the real thing.