

Walt & SkeeziX.

by

Frank O. King.



1921 & 1922.

Drawn & Quarterly Books,
MONTREAL.

Introduction

by

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with Chicago Research Notes by Tim Samuelson.

A father and son take a walk through the woods in the fall. The father, Walt Wallet, is puffy and rumpled while his adopted son Skeezip is slight, with a young boy's liteness. Alive with curiosity, Skeezip asks "Uncle Walt" why the fall leaves change color. The answers that Walt provides are less important than the tone and texture of the scene, a leisurely communion between parent and child that asks to be savored. Yet even in the pleasures of the moment, there is an undercurrent of sadness as well. The falling leaves remind us that change is a constant part of experience and one day the son will have a life apart from the father.

This bittersweet moment appeared in Frank King's *Gasoline Alley* in a full-page Sunday strip late in 1930. King famously drew that day's art in a "woodcut" style, which perfectly suited the autumn mood of the strip, a delight in the surface pleasures of life mixed with a melancholy awareness of human transience. With its evocation of complex emotions, *Gasoline Alley* was one of the greatest comic strips of the 20th century. It belongs in the same select league as George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (which explored the intricacy of love and hate) and Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* (that dead-pan study of childhood loneliness and rejection).

Yet, while *Gasoline Alley* enjoyed great popularity in its heyday during the 1920s to the

1960s, until now Frank King hasn't received the ample appreciation often bestowed on Herriman and Schulz by fans of good cartooning. The reason for this neglect is readily apparent: as a strip that dwelt on the daily travails of ordinary people, *Gasoline Alley* needs to be read in bulk to be appreciated.

The rhythm of *Gasoline Alley* is not the yuk-yuk gag a day humour of *Dilbert* nor the nail-biting melodrama of *Dick Tracy*. Rather, *Gasoline Alley* achieves its hold on the audience by being ruminative and cumulative: to catch the mood of the strip you have to imagine yourself as the new kid on the block, slowly getting to know the familiar neighborhood characters and easing yourself into their social circle.

Yet aside from a few scattered exceptions, King's version of the strip hasn't been available to those who missed it in its first newspaper appearance. By reprinting the peak years of King's work, this series aims to restore Frank King to the pride of place he deserves in comic strip history.



Main Street, Tomah, Wisconsin, 1899. Photograph likely by Frank King (Unless otherwise noted, all snapshots are assumed to be by Frank King, or a member of King's family.)

Frank King was among the most autobiographical of cartoonists. Bits of his life and the lives of his family, friends, and neighbors shows up refracted in the characters and storylines he created. To understand *Gasoline Alley*, we need to understand background of the man behind it.

Born in 1883 in Cashton, a small town in the Kickapoo Hills of Wisconsin, Frank Oscar King really grew up in the nearby town of Tomah, where his family settled shortly after his birth. King's family were middling people: his father John J. King had worked as a carpenter before becoming the co-owner of the King Bros. General Store in Tomah. Aside from his parents and younger brother Leland, King's childhood was spent surrounded by an extensive family in and around Tomah, including uncles, aunts and cousins.

In his spare time, John J. King (whose stern patriarchal visage was tempered by a bushy walrus mustache) served as circuit preacher for the Congressional Church. In unsettled and sparsely populated areas, as Wisconsin then was, circuit riders would travel to places without fixed churches, preaching in living rooms of farmers and around work camps. It's difficult to find any traces of a religious upbringing in Frank King's work, but, like his preacher dad, the cartoonist was always happy to travel. Both King himself and his characters had the wandering spirit, especially eager to take excursions into the countryside and the open road.

The geography of King's childhood would show up in *Gasoline Alley* in casual references to Tomah and the Kickapoo Valley, places that seemed within short driving distance

The King home in Tomah, 1899, titled "The Old Home" in appearing next to each other in King's personal photo albums. The southerly elevation of the house is on the left, the northerly on the right.





Opposite: The King family, c. 1898. From right to left: Leland Arthur, John J., Frank Oscar, and Caroline Harris King. Right: Frank King at around one year of age, 1884; John J. King, c. 1890s.



of where Walt Wasset and Skeezix lived. In the early 1930s, Walt Wasset would recall details of a fictional Wisconsin childhood with details surely drawn from King's actual memories. "When I was a boy I used to drive with my parents in a horse and buggy 35 miles over into Kickapoo Valley," Walt tells Skeezix on an autumn Sunday drive through the country. "The first night we'd stop with cousins in Kendall and finish up the second afternoon. Now we can do that much and cross two or three states in a day." Walt here is exalting modern speed and progress, but there is a whiff of nostalgia for his "horse and buggy" childhood as well.



W. G. Hall
1880



SO YOU TRADED IN THAT OTHER OLD JAZZ ORCHESTRA OF YOURS ON THIS CAR DID YOU? WHATEVER THEY ALLOWED YOU IT WAS TOO MUCH!

SAY YOU OUGHT TO HEAR THIS BABY WITH THE CUTOUT OPEN! SHE'LL RATTLE ALL THE WINDOWS IN THE BLOCK!

WHY DIDN'T YOU GET A LOUD YELLOW PAINT JOB? YOU CAN'T HEAR HER UNLESS SHE'S RUNNING-

IT'S A GOOD CAR BUT THEY SAY THE REAR AXLE IS WEAK-

AVERY DECIDES QUITE OFTEN TO GET A NEW CAR. BUT HE BACKS OUT JUST AS OFTEN

I'M GLAD WALT'S GOT IT. NOW MAYBE I CAN PERSUADE BILL TO GET ONE

I WANT AN ENCLOSED CAR. BUT DOCTOR IS AFRAID I'LL WANT HIM TO DRESS UP AS MY CHAUFFEUR!

King

1921.

February 5th.



