

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

November 3, 1950

Description: In the interview segment, ER interviews comic book illustrator Al Capp.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Al Capp

[ER:] Humor in our lives is an essential, as we all know. And this afternoon, my guest is one who has brought it to millions of people young and old. In my living room with me is Mr. Al Capp.

[Al Capp:] Hello, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] Very nice to have you, Mr. Capp. I'm afraid I'll have to own up right at the start that I hardly ever read the funny papers, and I've only read comic books when I've had to read them to a child that was ill, or there was some particular reason why I had to do it, so I'm completely unfamiliar with them. Except to the extent that sometimes I feel that I should blame you and other originators of comics for the behavior of my grandchildren! I was brought up, I'm afraid, in the old fashioned type of library the kind of library where you had the classics and modern novels, and I happened to have a grandfather who was interested in all kinds of ecclesiastical questions, so Gustave Dore Bible was one of my first fascinating things to look at and read. But um I don't really know whether today, um these comics have taken the place of classics or of uh general reading. I'd just like you to educate me.

[Al Capp:] Alright, I'll tell you about them, I'll tell you about comics. Uh-uh-uh the-the-the comic book has taken the place of the old classic, an-and for that I for one am so grateful. Uh and yet there isn't anything – there isn't anything new –there's nothing new about the comic book. The comic book is uh text illustrated just as your Dore Bible was, uh the text in the comic book is-is briefer, uh sometimes the illustrations are better than they were in the old classics.

[ER:] They look rather lurid to me.

[Al Capp:] Well, yes, some of them are-are lurid, uh those that illustrate lurid stories, but this is true, this is true, that the-the last outpost of-of imaginative-imaginative American illustrating is-is the comic page and the comic book. That- that's where you find all of our great illustrators like oh Milton Caniff and Alex Raymond and all the great ones of our time are doing uh comic books and uh comic strips. Uh-uh there there's nothing to worry about if a kid reads comic books, it just shows that he's normal. I would worry very much if one of my kids didn't read comic books. I'd feel that I had a very weird or medieval child. Uh--

[ER:] The only thing is they've lost the ability to read anything slow moving. You can't get a child today to read anything that takes a certain amount of concentration.

[Al Capp:] Yes, just as you you-you can't get a child to feel that it's reasonable to travel from New York to Boston by horse and buggy, we-we're just in a faster age, uh we're in an age when-when the story has got to happen fast, and that-that's the kind of age we're living in, the comic book is-is a product of cutting corners and it doesn't cut all the good out of it-it really doesn't.

[ER:] But don't you lose a great deal in some of the writing um that used to be really uh both uh interesting and descriptive and uh quite beautiful? (3:47)

[Al Capp:] Well, yes-yes well- well, their fashions do change, I- I don't think that that a child today could possibly get through a Fennimore Cooper book th-there is simply too much verbiage for the uh—

[ER and Al Capp overlap]

[ER:] Well what about [Charles] Dickens or [Walter] Scott?

[Al Capp:] Well I- I'll go along with Mr. Dickens, [Al Capp laughs] I think it's worth it I really think it's worth it, but uh I'm-I'm not a Scott man myself. I uh--

[ER:] Wouldn't you try and make your child read *Ivanhoe* or *The Talisman*?

[Al Capp:] No-no-no, I-I-I wouldn't, not if he preferred "Prince Valiant." I--"Prince Valiant" is a a wonderful comic strip done-done by a man named Hal Foster who in one beautiful picture does what Sir Walter Scott uh-uh would do in eighty-seven interminable pages.

[ER:] Well how about Mr. [William Makepeace] Thackeray? He had some rather good pictures of people.

[Al Capp:] He did indeed. There's-there's a great deal of quality in-in-in all of them, ah just as there is in in our modern uh cartoons, they too have-have in some cases enormous quality. And-and-and the child who-who today reads "Prince Valiant" gets as much out of um Foster's drawings and Foster's wonderful stories as I did when I read a man named [Howard] Pyle who did the *Knights of The Round Table*. Do you remember those wonderful things?

[ER:] Oh yes, well-well yes.

[Al Capp:] Yes well, Hal Foster is today's Pyle, he's as good an illustrator. Uh-uh he illustrates in-in-in comic--

[ER and Al Capp overlap]

[ER:] Well lots-lots of monies spent on comic books, but they don't seem to me to have any—you have nothing left. I mean, they're just read and swirled up and thrown away and they don't have any-any um any um--you don't build a library, you don't have anything to keep now. Now in those very Pyle books you talked about you kept those books for the illustration you read and re-read.

[Al Capp:] Mhm, and it was only, for instance, a very rich kid who could afford to own a Pyle book.

[ER:] That's true.

[Al Capp:] But the poorest kid today can have "Prince Valiant," and along with it he gets "Blondie" and a lot of other blood curdling, not other blood curdling stuff, but a lot blood curdling stuff.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] But what about the blood curdling stuff, Mr. Capp? What about uh all of the crime comics, the tremendous volume of uh-of uh comic strips that deal solely and simply with the violation of the law, and uh two gun shootings, and all the rest of it? There was a certain amount of that in in books but it wasn't quite as heavily larded on. (6:32)

[Al Capp:] Yes that is true, it is true that the literature for children is now much more occupied with-with crime than it was, and uh I won't mention the fact that radio, radio itself has has-has-has fed the American public the most lurid horrible crime stuff so that now that it demands it. And I I won't mention movies [Al Capp laughs] just loads our kids with crime uh day and night, nor will I mention television. I-I will say, however, that-that-that nothing in comics – and I'm always forced to defend crime comics, it's it's a-

a dreadful thing for me to have to defend them uh because I think there is much to be said against them, I think they're the least of all the offenders, in-in public entertainment, that the-the least of all the great public uh-uh mediums is the comic book, the least offensive.

[ER:] Here we are trying uh in the broad field of the world to create the sense of um a peaceful world. And um I think that my grandchildren collect more small guns and um uh new things of different kinds. I don't know where they get the ideas, but I-I feel as though their minds were turned towards certain types of um activities that is not really in line at all with the kind of world we're trying to build.

[Al Capp:] Well I-I-I don't know. I think that if I were a child and had no comic books, but read only the front page I would play with a gun too, I'd learn how to work it, in-in-in this time.

[ER:] I think that's true, that you are hearing um a certain number of things, but it's in a different context, rather I think. But now you tell me, what-what in your own um strips do you really try and teach? What-what is it that you're giving them, just entertainment, or something back of the entertainment too?

[Al Capp:] Well, I always deny publicly that there's anything back of the entertainment. I always insist that-that I am just a good natured loveable cartoonist trying to get along. Uh ah people have found much to my surprise, that-that that I've-I've uh had pitches, uh-uh that I've-I've uh had messages, uh-uh there really have never been a message in the "Lil' Abner," except that uh you oughtn't to kick or shove and that's it's a pretty good world if-if you don't. And-and that's really the only message that uh I have. Humorists can take no sides really because he finds his humor in the whole world in which he lives, and it can be any side at all whichever is idiotic. And thank heavens there is plenty of idiocy on all sides for me to draw from.

[ER:] Ah! Well, that's true and I would be one hundred percent with you on that. Many of us take ourselves too seriously and are constantly thinking of-of how important things are, when really we should think how funny they are. But now I think we have to stop a minute and let our sponsors say a word.

(Break from 10:08-10:23)

[ER:] Now I understand you want to say some more about comic books.

[Al Capp:] Oh yes I do.

[ER:] Go right ahead, Mr. Capp.

[Al Capp:] I do indeed, I think it's a justifiable criticism of the comic book that it has been used to uh boil blood and to chill spines an-and [Al Capp laughs] to describe crimes of all kinds, that's true. But-but because-because some comic books have not been the best kind of literature I-I-I don't think that's any reason for condemning the comic book as a form. Any more than you would condemn the the-the uh-uh stiffly bound book as a form because there was such a stiffly bound book as *Mein Kampf*, uh it's still a good idea to have a book [ER: Mhm.]. And-and-and the important thing is uh-uh-uh how can the comic be used. Now and I-I-I found out myself that it-it can be used for anything you choose to use it for. During the war I-I-I had to deal with amputees because I am one. Ah uh and uh there was a problem in our amputee hospitals, and Walter Reed was one of them, and uh this was it, a lot of good solid literature on the care and use of feeding of the wooden leg had been issued by a lot of good and honest people. And and-and there they uh were on the on the uh bed tables. (11:50)

[ER:] Nobody ever read them!

[Al Capp:] Of course they didn't read them they were too dull [Al Capp laughs]. The-the kids would never read them, they read comic books. And that was the great problem of those who-who-who were in

charge of the amputees. And-and-and my thought wasn't a very bright one, it was the most obvious one, and that was to do a comic book about a wooden leg, but to have a lot of girls in it, and have some shooting, and have some suspense, but also along with it tell them how to manipulate a wooden leg. And I did and-and-and it did some good. I told them what I knew about it and that that is it, that the comic book can be used for anything as-as Mr. Taft has found out within the last month or so.

[ER:] Well, I know and I and I know that, and I know you have done, because I remember you worked for the treasury too.

[Al Capp:] Oh yes, indeed sure we sold bonds with comics, so you can do some useful things with comics.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I'd like to just break in and ask another question, a little earlier you said uh that you have always uh decried the idea that there is anything behind any of your strips except pure entertainment. Now ah do you maintain that such uh strange characters as the Shmoo and the uh Money Ha-Ha have no uh-uh lesson to teach?

[Al Capp:] Oh no, the only lesson they have to teach anybody else is what they've taught me. I mean, I see these things around me and I put 'em down. [Elliott Roosevelt and Al Capp laugh] From then on in, from the characters --

[ER and Al Capp overlap]

[ER:] I thought they didn't look like any animal [ER laughs].

[Al Capp:] I-I, gee, I hope not [Al Capp and ER laugh].

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You'd get sued by the animals [Elliott Roosevelt laughs].

[Al Capp:] Uh but-but-but uh there-there never has been any pitch uh in in "Abner," or I don't think in any-any comic strip uh really, except to amuse and entertain and what's most important to worry people. Cause that is--

[Al Capp and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Did Little "Orphan Annie" ever sell a message?

[Al Capp:] Well Little "Orphan Annie" is a-ah strip with another point of view. I think the author of "Little Orphan Annie" has his own idea of what this country should be like and-and-and that of course permeates his strip. (14:19)

[ER:] So it really does represent the philosophy of uh the person who makes the comic strip?

[Al Capp:] Oh yes, I can't draw a shoe without doing an editorial on shoes. Uh I mean that's the way a shoe looks to me, uh-uh I have nothing to -- no idea to sell, that I just uh I draw a building because that's the way it looks to me. So that-that fundamentally almost every line a cartoonist draws is uh is uh an opinion.

[ER:] Well you have other interests besides the cartoons haven't you because you are a partner aren't you or director in a large publishing company?

[Al Capp:] Yes, I um-I'm uh-I'm a sort of furtive partner [ER and Al Capp laugh] in something called Toby Press. Uh I--

[ER:] Why a furtive partner [ER and Al Capp laugh]?

[Al Capp:] Well, they publish a lot of magazines that that I don't want to read.

[ER:] Oh! [ER, Al Capp, and Elliott Roosevelt laugh] That's wonderful.

[Al Capp:] Ah but uh some of them are fine, the magazines I don't want to read are the Abner magazines, the other ones I love [Elliott Roosevelt laughs].

[ER:] I see, um but you're also co-owner of the highly successful Boston Summer Theater. Do you take a really active part in the productions?

[Al Capp:] I do, indeed. I do contribute something to the Boston Summer Theater. Now my partner in that is Lee Faulk, and-and our seasons start in the beginning of July, I vanish in the middle of June. Lee runs the whole business until the first of August. I come back and it's been a great success. And-and so that-that by the way is the secret of how to do a successful summer theater, have me a partner and have me go away [Elliott Roosevelt laughs].

[ER:] Well, do you do it with young actors and actresses or with stars? Or how--what do you do?

[Al Capp:] Well, we have established stars, we've had everyone down. I mean, everyone who is on the summer circuit people like Lillian Gish and Franchot Tone and we have a permanent uh-uh company of uh actors who support them and uh us.

[ER:] Well, I-I think it's interesting because you have such varied interests because I also find that uh two summers ago you replaced Drew Pearson as a news commentator on the radio. Did you do all the prophecies that Drew Pearson does?

[Al Capp:] There was one prophecy I didn't do on my first broadcast, and that was prophesize that I wouldn't be permitted to go on [Elliott Roosevelt and Al Capp laugh] because that's what happened. (16:54)

[ER:] Did that happen, why?

[Al Capp:] It did. I said something disrespectful about a man named J. Parnell Thomas.

[ER:] Oh?

[Al Capp:] I did, I was premature, [Al Capp laughs] and that was-that was--

[ER:] Well that was a dangerous thing to do, wasn't it?

[Al Capp:] Well more than that, it was fatal. [Al Capp, ER, and Elliott Roosevelt laugh] I served twelve minutes as a commentator.

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[ER:] Was that all--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Do you mean you were cut off the air?

[Al Capp:] Well no-no, but they asked me would I not discuss news. After my first show, they asked me not to discuss news because I didn't have the uh background for it like-like Kate Smith and Robert Montgomery [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh].

[ER:] Well, I think that's perfectly lovely. I think that's terribly funny. Well now I understand that you started uh one other thing, which I never heard about until today. And that's Sadie Hawkins Day, which I'm told is celebrated in America by 40,000 groups of people annually, and that's it's also celebrated in Scandinavia and in various other countries. [Al Capp: Yes I'm uh--]How did you bring that about?

[Al Capp:] Well, I'm afraid all of that's true. Uh-uh well about-about 12 years ago, I was stuck for an idea, so I whipped up something called Sadie Hawkins Day, which I said in my script was an old mountain tradition. On this one day of the year every desperate unmarried girl in the hills could chase an unattached and horrified boy and [Al Capp laughs] if she caught him by sundown he was hers and-and-and uh she could marry him. And-and-and I did it in the strip, and then I found out that co-ed schools were doing it all over the South, then-then then the next year I repeated it and it spread like a vial thing all over the country. And-and now it's--there it is.

[ER:] You just created an extra um day, instead of it having it come every 4 years, in leap year, you just created it every year. That's what you did!

[Al Capp:] Well, I made it legal for girls to chase boys on that day.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes but they do it every other day of the year too [Elliott Roosevelt laughs].

[Al Capp:] That's-that's what I felt, I felt that this-this--I made it alright.

[ER:] You mean most times they hide it, but this time you let it uh--

[Al Capp:] Well, this time they can whoop and holler, [ER laughs] they can do it.

[ER:] Well, I think it's wonderful, but above everything else you like your comics?

[Al Capp:] I-I do, I think the-the comic strip uh gives such enormous freedom to the artist and to the writer. (19:29)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, you-you know I'd like to break in, you know that you said that the uh movies and television and the radio were guilty of selling a great many horror uh stories to the youth of America. But most of them are borrowed from the comic strips.

[Al Capp:] Well, that's like the chicken and the egg [Al Capp and Elliott Roosevelt laughs]. I don't know who done it first. Except that this thing is true that the Americans love it, and uh we are a decent people although we do love to hear stories of bloodshed.

[ER:] Oh well, there's no doubt about it, but uh children I don't think are ever as horrified by uh um the dreadful things that happen as grown people are. So perhaps you've got a real secret there, they can stand a lot more of that.

[Al Capp:] It's because it isn't real to them, it's just kind of fun, it really is kind of unreal fun.

[ER:] Well, I can't tell you how grateful I am for--to you, for coming tonight and perhaps I'll try reading some of the comic strips to make up for my negligence.

[Al Capp:] Careful, careful, it gets you [Al Capp and ER laugh].

[ER:] Well, thank you so much [Al Capp: Thank you.]. Now I'll have to turn it back to my son, Elliott.

(20:45)

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