

In San Francisco

# Comics academy established

SAN FRANCISCO (LAT) — The two-story, 12-room house in the quiet San Francisco residential neighborhood is the only place in America devoted to the study, collection and preservation of the comic strip.

It's also the home of Barbara and Bill Blackbeard.

Blackbeard, 45, pulp magazine writer and lifelong comic strip fan, founded the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art four years ago.

"It was something someone had to do," said Blackbeard, who happens to be clean shaven—and bald.

"This is the first time that the 78-year-old art form has been isolated for study.

"And it's only fitting the first permanent study center for comic strips should be established in the city where it all started."

The first comic strip ever published was James Swinerton's "Little Bears," a series that began appearing weekly in 1893 in the San Francisco Examiner, Blackbeard said.

"There have been at least 10,000 different comic strips in this country alone since Swinerton launched the art form," he said.

"Some lasted only a few weeks, others continued uninterrupted for half a century or more.

The Academy of Comic Art has a good start—more than 100 complete works so far, clipped from old newspapers and filed.

On file in Blackbeard's home are all of Windsor McCay's "Little Nemo" comic strips, for example. The cartoon appeared in newspapers from 1905 through 1913, then reappeared from 1922 through 1926.

All of "Polly and Her Pals," "Prince Valiant," "Flash Gordon," "Dick Tracy," "Tarzan," "Little Orphan Annie," "Gasoline Alley" and "Harold Teen" are there, too.

Only slightly less complete are the files on "Buster Brown," "Happy Hooligan," "The Katzenjammer Kids," "Mickey Mouse" and "Buck Rogers."

Blackbeard, his wife and a dozen other comic strip addicts—mostly middle-aged men and women—spend hours each week clipping cartoons from old

newspapers with razor or scissors.

The Blackbeards' home is jammed from floor to ceiling with bound newspapers, with cabinets filled with comic strips, with books and with other material related to comics.

There's barely room for the couple's bed, stove and refrigerator. The bathroom is the only room in the house that does not double as academy space.

"We can't use the bathroom," explained Blackbeard, "because of possible moisture damage when we shower."

Blackbeard and his wife sold their car, most of their furniture and eliminated all unnecessary expenses to launch the academy.

The comic strip is a reflection of the times and mores of the American people.

"Sociologists find a wealth of material in the art form, so do historians and those interested in the inherent artistic values of

comic strips," he said.

"Few have assessed the role comic strips have played in American life, in literature and the arts.

"There's a great deal of interrelation between literature and comic strips. Many comics are spinoffs from popular fiction; many works of fiction can be traced directly to comic strips."

Blackbeard is a walking encyclopedia on comics. He knows the day many strips began, the history and development of story lines.

He opened a file of strips from a series by E.C. Segar first known as the "Thimble Theater."

Familiar characters appear—Olive Oyl, Sappo. But Popeye didn't come along until "Thimble Theater" had been going 10 years.

"Popeye became so popular that Segar renamed the strip after him," said Blackbeard. "First time Popeye shows up in the comic strip is Jan. 17, 1929."

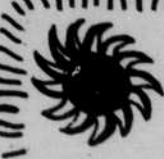


Bill Blackbeard displays his collection of comic strips.

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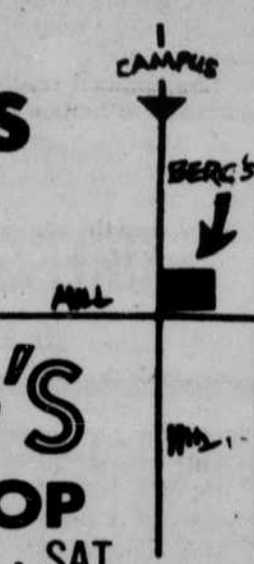
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