



ANIMATION LEGEND: WINSOR MCCAY is a Third Quarter 2016 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. **WINSOR MCCAY: THE MASTER EDITION** is a Third Quarter 2016 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below, Kino Ken discusses Winsor McCay, his films, and his career.

First, a comparison of the two rival dvd releases of McCay's seven complete short animations.

ANIMATION LEGEND: WINSOR MCCAY, from Slingshot Entertainment, offers all seven titles, three fragments also found on **WINSOR MCCAY: THE MASTER EDITION**, and a unique excerpt from **THE FLYING HOUSE**. That one clip is the only bonus on the Slingshot dvd.

WINSOR MCCAY: THE MASTER EDITION, released as part of the Milestone Collection through Image Entertainment, sports the same seven full films and three fragments, plus audio commentary by animator John Canemaker and an eighteen-minute video interview of John Fitzsimmons by Canemaker in 1976 interspersed with topical clips from the McCay shorts. It also includes a Stills Gallery with contemporary reviews and news articles providing supplemental information. This makes it at least more informative than the Slingshot release.

Winsor McCay may or may not have been born in the province of Ontario, Canada. Three different birth years have been reported for him. Pick one: 1867, 1869, or 1871. As for his birthplace, two prime candidates are West Zorra, Ontario, Canada and Spring Lake, Michigan, United States. Which means he was either a native Canadian or a native American. Truly a child of mysterious origins.

According to www.bookrags.com/biography/winsor-mccay, the future artist was named for his dad's boss, Zenas G. Winsor. At an early age, the boy showed remarkable artistic drawing talent, despite having very little or no formal training. Skill as a quick draw specialist earned him employment as poster creator and newspaper cartoonist. McCay traveled from Michigan to Chicago, Cincinnati, and, finally, New York City. There he established himself as an editorial cartoonist and comic strip creator. A frequenter of dime shows and vaudeville entertainments, Winsor might have learned a great deal from them about timing humor.

He began bringing his comic strips to the stage as live presentations around 1906. By that time, James Stuart Blackton had already created the first United States short animation, **THE ENCHANTED DRAWING** of 1900, a ninety-second comedy in which a man's drawn face, hat, and cigar appear, move, and disappear. A bottle is given similar treatment. This seminal work can be screened at YouTube.

One year earlier, McCay dazzled readers with fantastic dream episodes in a comic strip appearing in the *New York Herald*. It was titled **LITTLE NEMO IN SLUMBERLAND** and is just as sensational to discover today as it was for readers in 1905. So popular were its characters that composer Victor Herbert and lyricist Harry B. Smith concocted a Broadway operetta with them that ran for 111 performances at the New Amsterdam Theater in 1908-1909. Their **LITTLE NEMO** consisted of twenty-nine musical numbers scattered over 12 scenes and three acts. McCay took the same hero and presented his adventures live on stage through a series of lightning sketches. By 1911, the cartoonist elected to adapt Nemo into an animation. The resulting work featured intriguing metamorphoses and perspectives. Starting with a live action segment, it was produced at Vitagraph Studios in New York City. Notably lacking plot, **LITTLE NEMO** was vastly more primitive than Frenchman Emile Cohl's groundbreaking productions for Gaumont, such as the 1909 **LES LUNETTES SPECTACLES (THE ENCHANTED SPECTACLES)** and 1910's **LE SONGE DU GARÇON DE CAFÉ (THE MIND OF THE CAFÉ WAITER)**. Nonetheless, the film was a more beautiful piece of workmanship than anything seen up to that point from Americans. Its live action cast included rotund comedian John Bunny and fellow cartoonist George McManus, later renowned for creating the comic strip "Bringing Up Father."

McCay's next foray into animation came in 1912 with the pain-inducing **HOW A MOSQUITO OPERATES**. In this suicidal black comedy, a pot-bellied male attempting to sleep is tormented by a gigantic, gluttonous mosquito named the Jersey Skeeter in its preceding comic strip manifestation.

Viewers got treated to a methodical display of insect vampirism, as Jersey arrived at a closed door with suitcase in tow, used alternate entry through open transom after an upward climb, then prepared to suck blood from anxious victim. Later on, the attacker memorably opened luggage and withdrew a grindstone, using the tool to whet a huge, needlelike stinger. Before settling down to business, it stared directly at the audience, paying homage, perhaps, to the gunman in **THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY'S** conclusion.

Bloated by initial successes and unable to resist one conclusive prolonged draught, the bloodsucker then miscalculated its storage capacity, resulting in fatal expansion and outburst.

HOW A MOSQUITO OPERATES, made for Vitagraph, is notable for rhythmic cycling of action and the anthropomorphic characterization of its antagonist.

McCay returned in his next film to the format of his first, combining animation and live action. His new cast included sports caricaturist Tad Dorgan, credited with inventing such

classic expressions as “yes, we have no bananas,” “drugstore cowboy,” and “dumb Dora.” Other players were McCay himself, George McManus, and two professional actors named Roy McCardell and Tom Powers.

This time around, McManus bet McCay couldn’t make a sketched dinosaur “move.” Why a dinosaur? Because the quintet had been recently ogling an Apatosaurus reconstruction in New York City’s Museum of Natural History.

Thus was a somewhat shy female dinosaur named “Gertie” brought to cinematic life. Gertie danced, pivoted her head left and right on command of trainer McCay, scratched an itching head with her tail, bowed, devoured boulder and tree, hurled a massive rock in retaliation for getting sprayed with water by a mastodon she tossed into a conveniently close body of water, and ultimately gave her creator a bareback ride.

Predictably a huge hit, particularly with children, Gertie had a second career as a vaudeville performer. This was abruptly terminated by William Randolph Hearst, who insisted McCay abandon the stage and concentrate on political cartoons.

As a consequence, four years would pass before another animation by the master came into theaters. THE SINKING OF THE LUSITANIA allied propaganda with art, re-enacting German U-boat torpedoing of the Cunard line ship near the southern Irish coast on May 7, 1915. Once again, unusual perspectives placed viewers in the center of dramatic activity, following a speeding missile as it cut through waves and watching the submarine’s approach as if swimming underwater alongside fish.

McCay emphasized the enormous length of R.M.S. Lusitania, its four smoking funnels, hapless passengers trapped in overturned lifeboats when a second explosion rocked the listing primary vessel, a mother unable to prevent dual drownings of herself and helpless child.

Though waves are too uniform and occasionally mistimed, animation generally is precise and potently suggestive.

Hard-pressed for a superior encore, McCay managed to turn out only three fragments during the years immediately following World War I. The Centaurs, Gertie on Tour, and Flip’s Circus were all anecdotal in form, lacking plot, theme, conflict, and character development. As always, superb draftsmanship was exhibited. Yet that proved insufficient compensation for overshadowing inadequacies.

Sometime around 1921, the animator turned his attention back to a comic strip he had not yet filmed titled “Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend.” After eating too much of a mixed dish comprised of cheese and heavily seasoned bread, the central character in each episode experienced a macabre nightmare.

BUG VAUDEVILLE purported to be a hobo’s dream triggered by overindulgence in cheese cake. All insect action remained confined within a proscenium arch, true to its theatrical origins. Juggling, boxing, cycling, and tumbling acts performed by bugs constituted mildly

diverting entertainment. When a gargantuan spider gulped down a spectator, horror replaced amusement, rousing the tramp sleeper and ending the film on a note of realism.

Far more grotesque was **THE PET**, in which a married woman adopts a stray beast that looks doglike but meows like a cat. Whenever fed, the odd creature inflated, becoming a prototype of King Kong and Godzilla, smashing buildings and ultimately requiring extermination by airplane gunnery. Possibly intended as a parable about the dangers of pampering strangers with free handouts, **THE PET**, made like **BUG VAUDEVILLE** and **THE FLYING HOUSE** for Jewel Productions, played very satisfactorily as horror flick.

THE FLYING HOUSE is even more disturbing. After eating hallucinatory Welsh rarebit, a woman dreamed that her husband, a man plagued by debts and taxes, escaped creditors by turning his house into an airplane and sailing off into friendlier skies with her. Solving one problem, the debtor's invention generated others, including hostile reception from a moon man redirecting the two travellers with a swipe from a fly swatter. This oddity may have influenced designers of the recent **UP** feature.

Here are running times, production studios, and dates of each completed McCay short, in probable chronological order:

1911: LITTLE NEMO a.k.a. WINSOR MCCAY, THE FAMOUS CARTOONIST OF THE N.Y. HERALD AND HIS MOVING COMICS Vitagraph Co. Director: Winsor McCay Animator: Winsor McCay Producer: Winsor McCay Cinematographer: Walter Arthur partly hand-colored black-and-white 7 minutes, or 10 minutes at 16 frames per second projection speed with John Bunny, Winsor McCay, and George McManus live action introducing animation

1912: HOW A MOSQUITO OPERATES Vitagraph Co. Director, animator, writer, and producer: Winsor McCay black-and-white 6 minutes full animation

1914: GERTIE THE DINOSAUR Box Office Attractions Director, animator, writer, and producer: Winsor McCay Tracer: John Fitzsimmons black-and-white 12 minutes live action introduction plus animation and pixilation with George McManus, Winsor McCay, Robert McCay, Thomas "Tad" Dorgan, Tom Powers, and Roy McCardell

1918: THE SINKING OF THE LUSITANIA Universal Film Manufacturing Company Director, animator, writer, and producer: Winsor McCay Assistants: John Fitzsimmons and William Apthorp Adams black-and-white 12 minutes full animation

Between 1918 and 1921: Three fragmentary films

- a. "The Centaurs" black-and-white 3 minutes Director and animator: Winsor McCay Producer: Winsor McCay
- b. "Gertie on Tour" black-and-white 2 minutes Director and animator: Winsor McCay Producer: Winsor McCay A less playful Gertie overturns a trolley in this unfinished film.
- c. "Flip's Circus" black-and-white 8 minutes Director: Winsor McCay?

Writer: Winsor McCay Animator: Winsor McCay Considering the misspelling of the animator's patronym on a title card, it's possible someone else directed scenes involving a clapboard and live action hand. Here, editing instructions are displayed on a clapboard between scenes of clown-like Flip being gulped and expectorated by Baby, a goateed animal looking like a cross between the earlier Gertie and the later "Pet." Characters such as tycoon Gink, motoring around in an automobile with a huge bankroll resembling a rolled carpet in the backseat, and a contortionist capable of swivelling the top half of his body a full 360 degrees and stretching out his neck like a rubberized tube, make their screen debuts. Flip spends a lot of time clubbing other characters and attempting to pass himself off as an acrobat. This fragment may have been intended as an instructional tool for budding animators.

Around 1921:

- 1. DREAMS OF A RAREBIT FIEND: BUG VAUDEVILLE** Rialto Productions
black-and-white 12 minutes Director: probably Winsor McCay Animator and writer:
Winsor McCay full animation
- 2. DREAMS OF A RAREBIT FIEND: THE PET** Rialto Productions black-and-white
11 minutes Director: Robert McCay? Animator: Winsor McCay
Writer: Robert McCay? full animation
- 3. DREAMS OF A RAREBIT FIEND: THE FLYING HOUSE** Rialto Productions
black-and-white 11 minutes Director: Winsor McCay? Animator: Winsor McCay
Writer: Robert McCay? full animation

Of the finished films, most significant are **LITTLE NEMO, GERTIE THE DINOSAUR, THE SINKING OF THE LUSITANIA,** and **THE PET.** These are essential viewing for animation zealots ages ten and up.

Recommended books to further introduce McCay's artistry are the following:

Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend, published by Dover Publications, Mineola, New York in 1973

Little Nemo in Slumberland 1906-1909, published by Create Space in 2009.

This is an anthology of full-color comic strips created by McCay.

Winsor McCay: Early Works Volumes 1-8, published by Checker Book Publishing Group, Miamisburg, Ohio in 2006 These include obscure comic strips produced by McCay prior to the creation of **LITTLE NEMO IN SLUMBERLAND.**

Winsor McCay: The Editorial Works, published by Checker Book Publishing Group, Miamisburg, Ohio in 2006 These are McCay's editorial cartoons.

