

## Ding Darling on Cartooning

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Although Darling was a highly successful cartoonist, so far as is known he only wrote twice at any length on his philosophy of the cartoon or his methods of executing his art. These two short pieces were published in a pamphlet by the Jay N, "Ding" Darling Foundation and are reproduced here.



Register and Tribune  
J.N. Darling Des Moines 4, Iowa

November 8, 1961

Jack Bender  
606 Kuhlman Court  
Columbia Missouri

Dear Mr. Bender:

I will try to answer your Questionnaire as accurately as possible, but I must protest that very few of your questions permit the interpretation of the functions of a cartoonist as far as I have learned to know them after half a century of participation and observation. Looking back over the whole history of picture-making, intended to accomplish any major diversion of the trend of thought of nations or the world in general, I find very few, if any, political or social or religious trends which have been materially affected by the use of cartoons or pictures. I don't remember any political campaigns which have been either won or lost because of cartoons or cartoonists. In the olden days, when most picture-making dealt with religious subjects, the ardor of conviction may have been a potent agent, through the emotions, generated by the use of heroic picturization, but I

know of no General who won a war, no heathen who became a Christian, and no candidate whose success or failure was seriously altered by the use of cartoons. Instead, they have usually been generated by a school of thought and may have added to the ardor of the reader with like beliefs but I don't think they every moved any mountains, or changed the course of History.

In the days when there was only one cartoonist of note in a generation, he may have added strength to the believers, but even the rabble-rousers among the cartoonists have never achieved great victories.

I will proceed with the answers to your questions, as near as I can come to the answers, as follows:

Prior to 1900 Thomas Nast, in his campaign against Tammany, came nearest to being the No. 1 Cartoonist in the field of Politics.

After 1900 I would place David Low, who by his excellent draftsmanship and his social and political convictions, stands out as probably the best.

My technique in drawing cartoons has certainly changed since my early beginnings. Everyone's does. Skill with pen and ink, or crayon, naturally increases with experience and one learns, through the years, the kind of picture that is best appreciated by the reader. One learns that a cartoon, in the first place, must be a good picture, and no matter how serious the subject, a little comedy – either in the draftsmanship or in the selection of the allegory which must express an experience which is common to the general public – will help a great deal.

In my own work, I can't remember that I ever was greatly influenced by any other person's convictions or criticism. I did learn to avoid, as far as possible, drawing a cartoon on a subject which was not uppermost in the public mind at that particular time. I never was an apprentice, and had no education in Art. If I found among the picture-makers some tricks in caricature or composition, I presume I was affected, to some extent, but not, as I recall, in any particular field.

### **Public May Not Agree**

My favorite cartoons were not the ones which were the most highly praised by the public. I suppose the cartoon made at the time of the death of Theodore Roosevelt, entitled "The Long, Long Trail", received the most acclaim, but at the time I drew it neither I nor the Editor thought it was as good as it should be.

Long ago, as far back as the campaigns of William Jennings Bryan, I was convinced of the dangers of Inflation and I continued my emphatic expressions of its dangers to the economy of our nation. Serious thinkers gave my expressions some consideration but Inflation has never slowed down.

A second hobby of mine was the conservation of natural resources. Exploitation of our soils, waters, and wildlife has continued, unaffected by anything ever drawn by me or any of the others of a like mind.

A successful cartoonist will, if he is wise, change speed from day to day. The public tires of a steady diet of any one subject. Consequently, national and international subjects have to be interspersed with cartoons of human interest, which play on the foibles and eccentricities of the average citizen. It was my plan to have one out of every three cartoons on human interest subjects, and for beginners there is nothing so profitable as building up a following as cartoons on local subjects. Cartoons should be, now and then, serious, and an attempt to interpret to the reader the meaning of the issues which concern us in our public life and international relations.

No, I have never been sued, although sometimes rebuked for the viewpoints I have expressed, but as long as my conscience was clear I never avoided a subject on which I had a firm conviction, no matter how controversial.

I do not consult my editorial chiefs, and never have. An inexperienced beginner often profits by such consultation but after a cartoonist has achieved a reputation for integrity and accuracy of facts, editors usually leave cartoonists alone, and should. It is a rare thing to find an editor who knows the difference between a good and a poor cartoon, and I will admit that I have never been quite sure myself.

Yours very truly,  
Jay N. Darling

P.S. It has always seemed to me that the chief function of the cartoon should be to interpret the meanings of the passing show to the reader, who in the hurly-burly of life has not had the time or the inclination to read extensively or study thoroughly the problems of the day – in other words to explain the meaning of life: political, social and economic. The wiser the cartoonist is, and the better draftsman he can be, the more successful will be his career. It requires all the qualifications of an editorial writer, plus the capacity to express his thoughts in pictures, if the cartoonist is going to be a good one. Every cartoon should contain a little medicine, a little sugar-coating and as much humor as the subject will bear.

Bender was a graduate student at the University of Missouri in 1961; he was later with the Waterloo, Iowa, *Courier*.

### **How Ding Drew Cartoons**

Byrnes, Gene, ed. *Commercial Art, A Complete Guide to Drawing, Illustration, Cartooning and Printing*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952, pages 133-139.

J.N. Darling, better known by his signature “Ding”, was asked to write about his method for developing ideas. A master of exaggerated action in his drawings, as well as a humorous interpreter of serious political and controversial subjects, Mr. Darling has won the Pulitzer Prize twice. Not only are his cartoons

well worth careful study by the student, but the following description of how he develops his ideas will be found amusing and instructive.

“If I knew any easy way to get cartoon ideas, I’d tell you and then read it myself,” he begins.

Most people think a cartoonist just sits around in his bedroom slippers and lounging robe, waiting for an inspiration. Suddenly there is a Great Light, the heavens open, and an angel descends, touches him with the tip of her wing, and out pops a brilliant idea, born full armed like Minerva. Then all the cartoonist has to do is to make a few simple passes with his crayon and sell his picture for a hatful of money.

### **It’s Not That Way**

I’m sorry, but that isn’t the way it is. At least, it has never happened to me. If there are other cartoonists who get their ideas that way, then my testimony is only for those who, like myself, have to put themselves in the kettle, turn on the heat, and boil until enough soup stock has stewed out for serving. Sometimes it’s pretty thin broth. Clever draftsmen can make a very good cartoon entertaining and funny to look at with only a trace of an idea that will stand along in spite of mutilation by clumsy draftsmanship. Probably that is why I was asked to tell (if possible) how to get and develop the idea for an editorial cartoon as distinguished from the human-interest cartoon and comics. Speaking for myself, this is the process:

The primary specifications for a cartoon idea are:

First – It must be something that everybody will be interested in but which no one else has ever thought of before.

Second – It must be funny or sad or sting the living daylights out of something or somebody – and look out whom you pick for your target. It is surprising how many people there are who have pet corns which must not be stepped on, and editors are notoriously sensitive about canceled subscriptions.

Third – If it is to be an editorial cartoon, which is the only kind I know anything about (if any), it should carry a penetrating message base on universally accepted social, economic, or political philosophy, calculated to educate and uplift the masses. I don’t remember ever having embodied all of these requirements in a cartoon, but that is what the editorial cartoonist is supposed to shoot at.

Keeping these primary specifications in mind, you next look for your subject matter, what the rest of the world is thinking most about that day is your best bet. It might be the President’s message to Congress, an earthquake in Japan, the brevity of women’s skirts, or the scientist who crossed the honeybee with the fire-fly so it could work twenty-four hours a day. You can make an acceptable cartoon on any subject on God’s green earth if public interest is thoroughly aroused. And if the public doesn’t happen to be interested in anything, which it frequently isn’t, then there is always the weather and

taxes. A pretty heavy diet of newspaper and magazine reading will generally be found a safe guide to the subject or subjects uppermost in the public mind.

Everything has been quite easy and simple so far. Anyone can do that much.

### **Then You Proceed**

Having selected the subject matter, you must make sure that your facts are accurate and that you have a full understanding of their significance. If you don't already know all about your subject, look it up. That done, you will come to the critical stage, which will determine whether your cartoon idea is going to be a success or a failure and here is where the fun comes in if you are successful, and the depths of morbid depression if you fail. This is where the cartoonist runs himself through the wringer in an effort to find a pictorial situation which will translate his subject matter into terms of common human experience. The more clownish the translation, the better.

Here you must depend on your own resources and you drag out from the pigeonholes of your memory all the well-known historical parallels, familiar quotations, Mother Goose and nursery rhymes, Shakespeare, Biblical parables, song hits of the day, Greek Mythology, Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales, and the endless variety of familiar incidents of human or animal behavior, looking for an exact parallel which, when applied to your subject matter, will humanize the dull facts of the situation you are trying to illustrate. In other words, you take a complex subject of general importance and reduce it by the least common denominator to quick and easy understanding, seasoned with a chuckle if possible.

Verbally, we would call this process 'speaking in parables'. Pictorially, 'allegory' is probably the best word for it. Noah Webster says allegory means 'figuratively speaking, the veiled presentation of a meaning, metaphorically implied but not expressly stated.' The late Will Rogers did it beautifully in words. The editorial cartoonist tries to do it in pictures. He purports to be a visual interpreter of passing events and is to the news of the day what the news commentator is to the radio news broadcast – only funnier, I hope. The richer your metaphor, the better will be your cartoon idea. In most cases it takes a lot of distilling to refine your idea, and if you have to make a cartoon every day you will do well to have several barrels of sour mash fermenting on the side to be ready to use for the day doesn't cook. You will need a lot of yeast, and I don't know any drugstore where it can be bought. Then all you have to do is draw it.

### **Now, For Instance**

Let me give you some examples. I will never forget the occasion that John L. Lewis and Franklin D. Roosevelt had their violent falling out, ending a most beautiful friendship. Lewis had blasted the President with the most scorching invective he could think of, and Lewis is good at that. It was the most important new of the day, and Talburt, of the New York World-Telegram, found his metaphor in the song hit of the day, "Oh, Johnny, Oh, Johnny, How You Can Love." The picture was a gorgeous ironical burlesque of John Lewis, all haired up with rage, walking out on his old friend and leaving the startled

Roosevelt sitting amidst wrecked office furniture, with his own portrait (which he had lovingly inscribed to Lewis) busted over his head, and the picture frame dangling about his ears. It was a perfect illustration of the situation, and I venture the late President got a good laugh out of it himself. I don't know how long Talburt searched in the crannies of his head for the formula that just fitted the situation, but very few cartoons like that just happen. Most of the time you have to dig and sift a long while to find them.

Possibly the best way to convey a clear understanding of the process by which a cartoon idea is arrived at is to trace one through the mill. Recently Russia announced that each of its component states would be given independence in its international and diplomatic relationships with foreign powers. That meant sixteen ambassadors from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics instead of one. Nothing has happened since the League of Nations debate over relative voting strength among the major powers which threatened so completely to upset the balance in the diplomatic applecart, with the attendant discomforts and confusion when Stalin and Molotov with the sixteen new members of their big family tried to climb aboard, was the first thought. McCutcheon could have done it perfectly, but it required too skillful draftsmanship for me to attempt, and, besides, when completed it would have presented only perhaps a humorous picturization of an event but carried none of the suggestions of deeper significance. There was a bit of irony present in the situation of Great Britain with her big family of colonies, and the United States, being jealous of Russia with her family of sixteen component subdivisions. After much travail I settled on an idea of Johnny Bull and Uncle Sam as representatives of the Margaret Sanger cult, using birth control on Russia and her newborn litter of little bears.

### **Criticizing The Public**

Occasionally most editorial cartoonists have a hankering to be missionaries to a good cause. It is a dangerous impulse and subject to serious consequences if your expressed convictions don't happen to meet with general approval. Here is one that didn't. The subject uppermost in the public mind at the time promised to be the next day's government release of the statistics on the cost of living and freezing price levels. Here was a situation of the public clamoring for cheaper prices and at the same time, with total disregard for consistency, doing everything that would make the freezing of price levels an impossibility. Everyone was demanding more money for the products of their labor and then bitterly criticizing the Office of Price Administration because the cost of living was rising. Here was a situation where practically the whole population was trying to go both up and down at the same time in the same elevator, obviously impossible of execution pictorially, but somewhere hidden in the situation. I was sure there was a way to show the inconsistency. The germs of two cartoons finally emerged from the same brew, after much stewing. The first one was a man personifying 'rising cost of production' running up a tall ladder and telling his own shadow, 'rising prices,' to stay down where it belonged. There was a tickle in the idea, but I lost it in the drawing and it turning out just a diagram of a truism and was a flop as a cartoon.

The second attempt was more successful, and although the cartoons appeared one right after the other no one suspected they were twins because of the wide difference in

the two metaphors to express the same thought. The second cartoon idea started with the thought of freezing prices under difficulties. Freezing prices suggested what most every boy of my generation had experienced, that is, grinding away on an ice-cream freezer that wouldn't freeze. But how was I to express the other end of the theme; that the public was preventing the freezing? They could be shown building a fire under his own ice-cream freezer. They had to be building a fire for a reasonable purpose and only inadvertently putting the heat on the freezer. Well, where would most people build a fire? Probably in a cookstove, to cook something they wanted cooked. And what everyone wanted cooked was more income and profits for themselves. But there the idea broke down, for it failed to take into account the boy turning the ice-cream freezer – unless I set the boy with his freezer on top of the stove, along with the boiling pots and kettles of increasing cost of production and rising prices. Ohm but putting the boy on top of a stove to freeze ice cream was absurd! Well, so were the rising costs of production and stabilized selling prices absurd. Yes, maybe it would work and be more effective because of the obvious inconsistency. It did.

Cartoons in their finished form, when they appear in the papers, may look like spontaneous combustion. Those precision ballets of the Rockettes when they appear on the stage have all the aspects of a goodlooking lot of girls who, with unpremeditated abandon, suddenly decide to express their joy of living by kicking up their heels in exactly the same way at exactly the same moment. But ballets and cartoons have a lot more dull routine back of them than meets the eye.

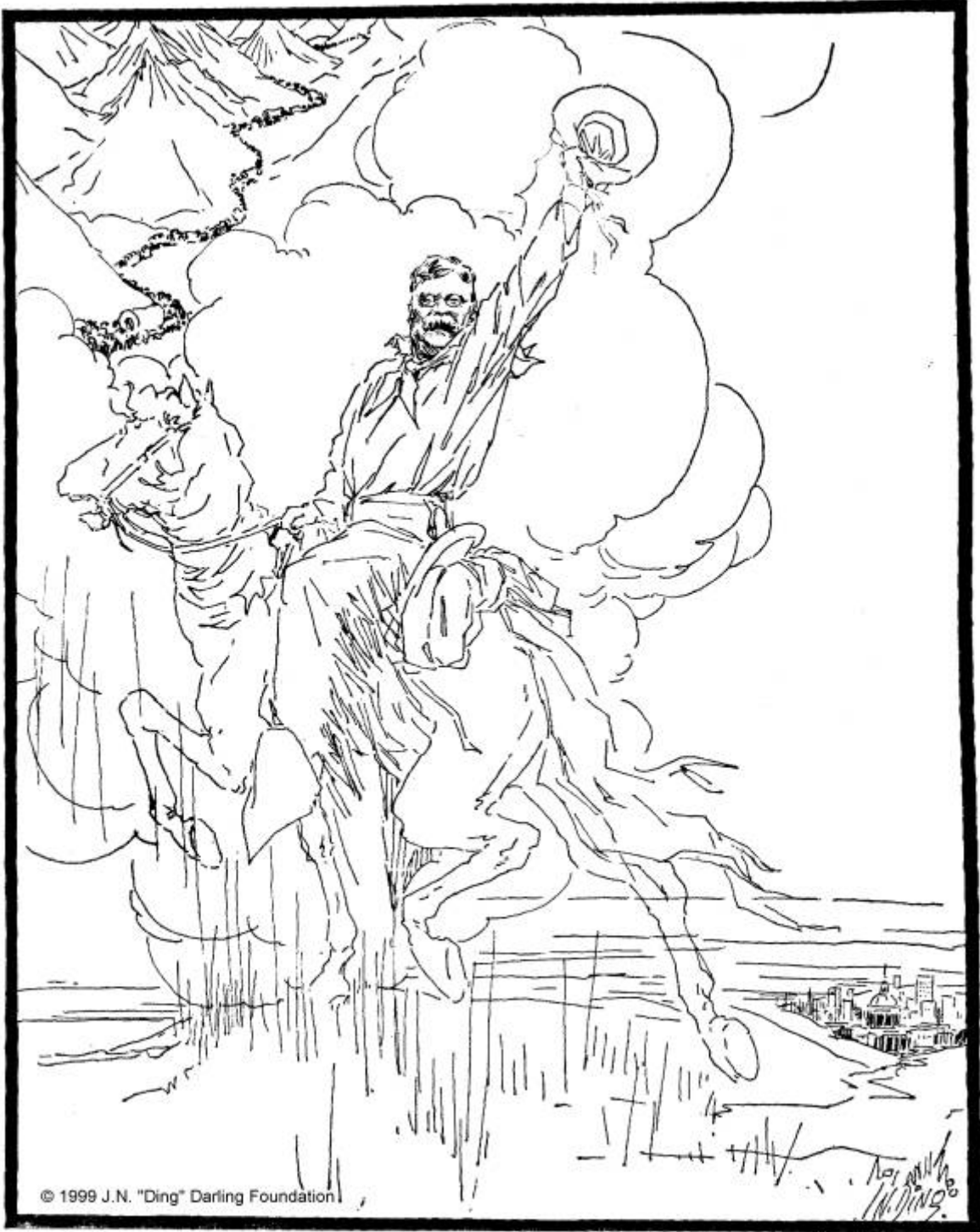


The Remarkable "The Long, Long Trail"



Sometimes a cartoon, which the artist is inclined to regard as below his standard, is received overwhelmingly by the public. Mr. Darling's drawing, "The Long, Long Trail", was one of those incidents. In a recent letter to the editor, he recalls the misgivings shared by both his newspaper and himself.

"That cartoon had a most precarious start," he writes, "and came darned near never being published. I had drawn it and thrown it on the floor as a discard and tried to make a better one. I couldn't get the second one done in time for the first edition, and the local managing editor only ran The Long, Long Trail under protest in the first edition, intending to pull it out and run the cartoon I had on my drawing board through the rest of the editions. Because I was in such a sweat to get the second cartoon done, I forgot to countermand the order for the mats to go out to the Syndicate, and before I got the second cartoon done, the mats on The Long, Long Trail were made and in the mail to 111 outside newspapers. The Herald-Tribune's managing editor didn't like the cartoon either, and held it up with the expressed hope that I might produce a better one for the day of T.R.'s funeral. The rest of the story is well known. (The reproductions of "The Long, Long Trail" in books, calendars, and deluxe reprints now number over 25,000,000 not counting the regular newspapers on the syndicate list). J.N.D.



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## **Darling Sources**

Profile adapted from:

<http://www.fws.gov/refuges/education/aldoLeopoldLandEthic.html>

and

<http://www.eoearth.org/view/article/51cbece47896bb431f68e478/>

Photograph\* from:

[https://www.google.com/search?q=aldo+leopold&safe=active&rls=com.microsoft:en-us:IE-SearchBox&biw=853&bih=595&tbm=isch&imgil=p\\_TKj8AY5ApIaM%253A%253B19TnCkM82enrCM%253Bhttp%25253A%25252F%25252Fwww.exploreiowageology.org%25252Faldoleopold.php&source=iu&pf=m&fir=p\\_TKj8AY5ApIaM%253A%252C19TnCkM82enrCM%252C\\_&usg=\\_\\_Mid8TrI-OPZmy0S7wINFahX3QLA%3D&ved=0C1cBEMo3&ei=\\_qsZVZjNK7C0sAT5x4LACA#imgdi=i\\_&imgrc=a6c06zGNG25OrM%253A%3B1HnrFkvYvozLOM%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Famvboard.files.wordpress.com%252F2013%252F08%252Faldo-leopold.jpg%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Famvohio.org%252F2013%252F10%252F28%252F1348%252F%3B300%3B400](https://www.google.com/search?q=aldo+leopold&safe=active&rls=com.microsoft:en-us:IE-SearchBox&biw=853&bih=595&tbm=isch&imgil=p_TKj8AY5ApIaM%253A%253B19TnCkM82enrCM%253Bhttp%25253A%25252F%25252Fwww.exploreiowageology.org%25252Faldoleopold.php&source=iu&pf=m&fir=p_TKj8AY5ApIaM%253A%252C19TnCkM82enrCM%252C_&usg=__Mid8TrI-OPZmy0S7wINFahX3QLA%3D&ved=0C1cBEMo3&ei=_qsZVZjNK7C0sAT5x4LACA#imgdi=i_&imgrc=a6c06zGNG25OrM%253A%3B1HnrFkvYvozLOM%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Famvboard.files.wordpress.com%252F2013%252F08%252Faldo-leopold.jpg%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Famvohio.org%252F2013%252F10%252F28%252F1348%252F%3B300%3B400)

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Reading list item from:

<http://nctc.fws.gov/resources/knowledge-resources/wildread/thinking-like-a-mountain.pdf>

