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# The AAEC Editorial Cartoon Digital Collection at McCain Library and Archives

Nadia Nasr

*Santa Clara University*, [nnasr@scu.edu](mailto:nnasr@scu.edu)

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# What's So Special About...

Column Editor: Peggy Price, The University of Southern Mississippi

## The AAEC Editorial Cartoon Digital Collection at McCain Library and Archives

By Nadia Nasr

Digitization Specialist

McCain Library and Archives

The University of Southern Mississippi

[Nadia.Nasr@usm.edu](mailto:Nadia.Nasr@usm.edu)

Former *Bangor Daily News* editorial cartoonist, Vic Runtz, describes him as a “spry little cat in a sporty bowtie.” Never officially named, the cat made appearances in Runtz cartoons for 35 years, sometimes making comments; dutifully taking notes on a notepad, recording what he saw; or even participating in the action. His various expressions within the cartoons have included states of surprise, shock, concern, sympathy, and an occasional twinkling smile. Figuratively, and sometimes literally, he curled right up in the cartoon and made himself at home.



Vic Runtz's spontaneous and charming feline character symbolizes the unique role of the editorial cartoonists who are the eagle-eyed observers, documenters, and reporters of current events. This unique perspective is one feature in particular that is so special about the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists (AAEC)

Editorial Cartoon Collection housed in the McCain Library and Archives at the University of Southern Mississippi. The collection, part of the University Library's special collections, consists of the original artwork of approximately 6,500 editorial cartoons from over 200 cartoonists who have been or still are members of the AAEC. The AAEC was chartered in 1957 for the purpose of promoting and stimulating public interest in the editorial page cartoon. Featured artists in the collection include, naming only a few, Gene Basset (*Scripps-Howard Newspapers*), Eddie Germano (*Brockton Enterprise*), Jack Jurden (*Wilmington Evening Journal*), Eldon Pletcher (*Times-Picayune*), and Vic Runtz (*Bangor Daily News*).

The unique story of how the McCain Library came to acquire this collection begins in 1966. Librarians solicited three cartoons per annum from each of the members of the AAEC and purchased others to expand the collection. In 1968, AAEC president Arthur B. Poinier of the *Detroit News* organized a traveling exhibit of cartoons created by AAEC members. The exhibit was made available to journalism schools, university libraries, and other interested institutions for a two-week display period.

The Library's collecting objective and the AAEC's administration of the traveling exhibit converged in August of 1970. James Hanson, Curator of Special Collections at the McCain Library, was contacted by Thomas Curtis, cartoonist and active member of the AAEC. Curtis informed Hanson of the opportunity to acquire the traveling exhibit. In exchange, the Library would assume the responsibility of contin-

uing to circulate the exhibit. A contract was negotiated, correspondence was traded, and with the support of the University, the Library assumed administration of the exhibit in 1971. As the exhibit continued to travel, new cartoons were infused as old cartoons were retired and became the property of the Library. During the mid-1980s, donations of original artwork from AAEC members tapered off and it can be assumed that the traveling exhibit was retired soon after.

The informal title of the exhibit was “Them Damn Pictures,” a phrase attributed to William Marcy Tweed, the notorious “Boss” Tweed of New York City's Tammany Hall political machine during the 1860's and 1870's. He was reacting to political cartoons about himself, created by Thomas Nast for *Harper's Weekly*. As the story goes, Tweed is reported to have said to his lieutenants, “I don't care so much what the papers say about me. My constituents can't read. But, damn it, they can see pictures!” This reaction points to the impact of the editorial cartoon as a message medium, echoing the saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. “Pictures came before alphabets. Graphics go right from the eye into the brain. You do not have to be literate to understand a cartoon,” stated Ranan R. Lurie, political analyst and another featured editorial cartoonist in the collection.

In the introduction to his book *Here Today...Twenty-Five Years of Cartoons by Vic Runtz*, Runtz points out that editorial cartoons have historical value because they provide commentary on events that many today only know in historical terms, thereby juxtaposing the past with the present. “One

glimpse at a cartoon brings you up to date, ignites your imagination, deepens your political sophistication, satisfies your craving for a smile, and broadens your veins with humor," concluded Lurie. Take, for example, Runtz cartoon that features a "Checkpoint Charlie" at the entrance to the 1968 Democratic Convention. A delivery man has been granted access, but not before the cake labeled "Happy 60th Birthday LBJ" he was sent to deliver has been ruined on the tip of a soldier's bayonet, ostensibly for security reasons. The tongue in cheek satire of the response to the social unrest and public riots during the convention in Chicago is clearly depicted. With humor, the cartoonist has caught the attention and provided a jumping off point for further study about an historical event.



In the fall of 2000, special collections staff began efforts to enhance access to and preservation of the cartoons, and to provide learning opportunities to remote users by digitizing the cartoon collection. This effort includes the creation of Dublin Core metadata and digital surrogates, which are marked up as HTML web pages and then indexed in a keyword searchable database. Digitization efforts have provided practical cataloging and research experience for library science and history students at the University. To date, a total of 1500 cartoons have been digitized, and almost 700 are available for viewing by the public. The online exhibit

and searchable database can be accessed at <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spscol/aaec/index.html>.

Subject headings for the cartoons are those selected from the bibliographic database *America: History and Life*, a database that provides bibliographic references to the history of the United States and Canada. Published since 1964, it comprises almost 500,000 entries for periodicals that date as early as 1954. The bulk of editorial cartoons in the Library collection range in topics gleaned primarily from the years during the early 1960s through the mid-1980s, and includes such topics as civil rights, various presidential terms and elections, the Watergate affair, the Vietnam War, economic issues, and social protest.

Future plans for this special collection include the continued digitization of the remaining 5,000 editorial cartoons and the addition of artists' biographical information to the online exhibit (<http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spscol/aaec/index.html>). Additional learning opportunities include practicums for library science or history students and subject and name authority control. Recently, the Bibliographic Services department at Cook Library at Southern Miss has taken an interest in replacing subject headings from *America: History and Life* with Library of Congress Subject Headings, since the AHL list is not a true thesaurus and uses abbreviated forms of some headings. This will provide a wider variety of more accurate subject headings for description of cartoons, and may potentially lead to the creation of a unique controlled vocabulary for editorial cartoons that could be shared with other repositories that hold similar collections.

Editorial cartoonists personify history with humanity, humble the proud with witty caricature, and counterbalance tragedy with sympathy and indignation. Tom Curtis sums up the cartoonists function succinctly: "In addition to giving the public an occasional laugh (no mean contribution), the cartoonist offers an encapsulated vision of the important events of the political scene."

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