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Bud Fisher—Pioneer Dean of the Comic Artists

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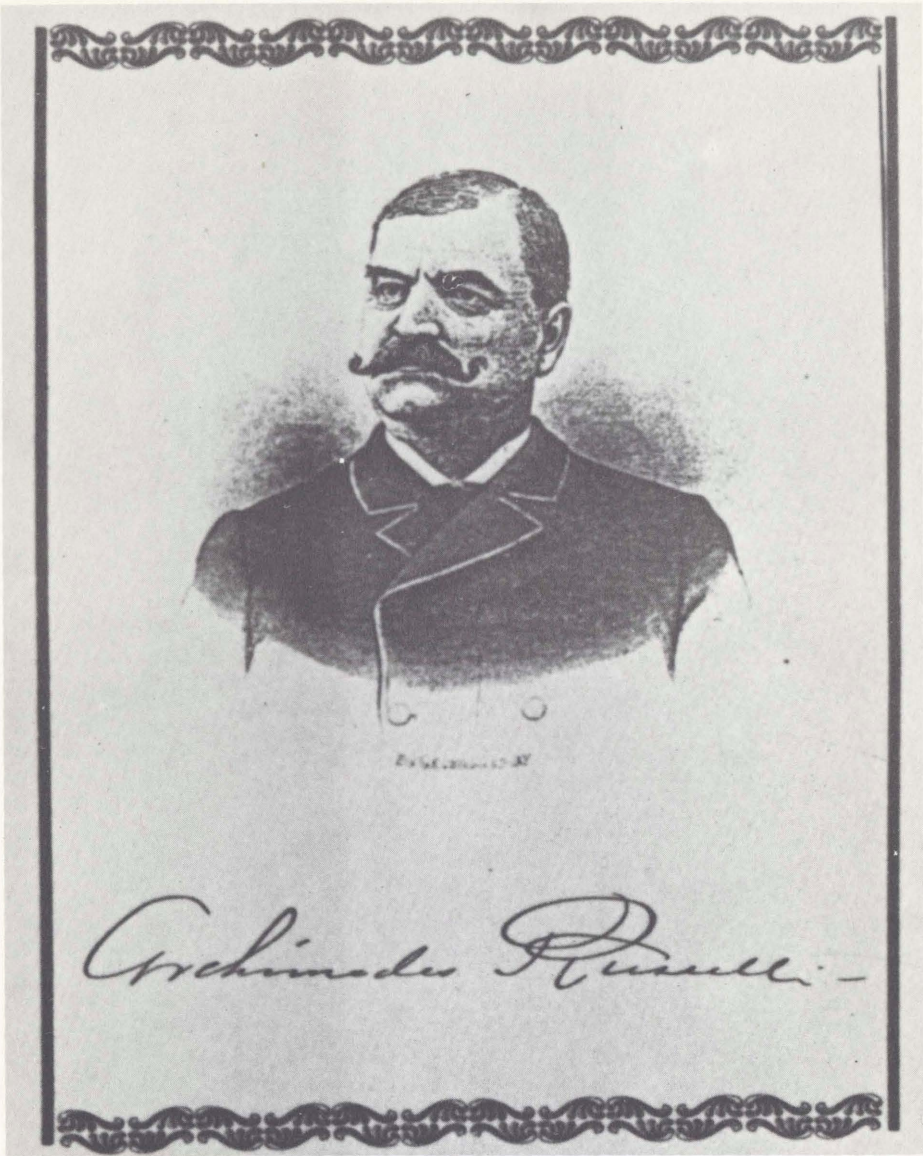


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ARCHIMEDES RUSSELL, 1840 - 1915

from *Memorial History of Syracuse, New York, From Its Settlement to the Present Time*,
by Dwight H. Bruce, Published in Syracuse, New York, by H.P. Smith, 1891.

THE COURIER

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Bud Fisher — Pioneer Dean of the Comic Artists

by Ray Thompson

The George Arents Research Library for Special Collections at Syracuse University has an extensive collection of original drawings by American cartoonists. Among the most famous of these are Bud Fisher's "Mutt and Jeff."

Harry Conway (Bud) Fisher had the distinction of producing the country's first successful daily comic strip. Comics had been appearing in the press of America ever since the introduction of Richard F. Outcault's "Yellow Kid" in 1896. Most of the early features had been drawn for the Sunday supplements, where color added an extra allure. Daily black and white cartoons had also appeared around the turn of the century, drawn by such later-to-be-great cartoonists as George B. McManus, Frederick Opper, Clare Briggs, Charles W. Kahles, and Rudolph Dirks. Many of these comics were of an experimental nature as the budding cartoonists gleefully explored the new medium.

Bud Fisher set the pattern of a new phase of visual entertainment that has endured and blossomed to this day. Everybody knows of "Mutt and Jeff" — an American institution and a synonym for "tall and short." Fisher was one of the most copied of the early cartoonists. One can trace his influence through dozens of strips created between 1910 and 1920. No one, however, has utilized Fisher's most distinguishing characteristics — the use of "gloves" on his characters. Mutt and Jeff wore their gloves indoors or out, at the beach or at the table. Fisher himself offered no explanation for this idiosyncrasy, perhaps he himself wore his gloves everywhere also. (Much later, Walt Disney depicted Mickey Mouse and

Mr. Ray Thompson has been a free lance cartoonist and feature writer for fifty-three years in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area. Over the years his work has been distributed by six newspaper syndicates (only one of which is still in existence). Thompson is now writing a book, *The Golden Era of Newspaper Comics — 1900-1930*. He contends that those early days of comics, through inspired ideas, art work, and large size reproductions, made a vast impact on the reading public, influenced trends, and affected political thinking.

For a number of years Ray Thompson has devoted his talents to the cartoon advertising field and many of his drawings and manuscripts are to be found in the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections.

In semi-retirement since 1970, the artist has become an author and publisher, specializing in the Colonial era of the Delaware Valley. His writings appear in six soft-cover books, published by The Bicentennial Press, Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, where Thompson makes his home.

some of his other characters wearing gloves, but they were a device to give the animals human-like hands.) In recent years, Fisher's successor on the strip, Al Smith, often jokes about the gloves. In one strip he shows Jeff coming to Mutt, saying: "I forgot my gloves." Whereupon Mutt takes pen and ink from the table and draws three little lines on the backs of Jeff's hands.

Harry Fisher, born April 4th, 1885, in Chicago, Illinois, left the University of Chicago in his junior year to become sports cartoonist on the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The year was 1905, and in the aftermath of the great 'quake and fire, the city was in a state of revitalization. The precociously talented Fisher, who possessed a glib tongue, persuaded his editor to allow him to draw a daily comic strip in which the hero was an inveterate horse player.

On Friday, November 15th, 1907, Bud Fisher's first daily strip appeared in the *Chronicle*. It ran a full eight columns wide, across the top of the sports page under the title: "Mr. A. Mutt Starts in to Play the Races." A seedy looking Mutt is reading the racing news and speculating on how he can become a millionaire. In the third panel, a race track tout gets his ear; and in the fourth frame Mutt is shown at the betting window of the track (labeled: Put in or Take Out Club) actually "betting" on real horses. A final panel invites the reader to "see what Mr. Mutt does for himself in tomorrow's *Chronicle*."

It was generally believed that "A. Mutt" was inspired by an earlier cartoon by Clare Briggs, "A Piker Clerk," a trouble-prone racetrack follower. The strip enjoyed but a brief run (1904).

Mutt played a solo role in Fisher's strip for about a year before little Jeff made his appearance.

Fisher's new strip had enormous visual impact, and the novelty of the cartoon soon had non-horseplayers following the misadventures of Mr. A. Mutt. Within a month, the *Chronicle* circulation jumped dramatically over that of its rival, William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Examiner*. John N. Wheeler, pioneer syndicate man, who later guided the fortunes of Bud Fisher in New York, said, "From the start it ["Mutt and Jeff"] was a terrific success, because in the daily strip Fisher gave tips on the races, and he had an extraordinary run of luck."¹

Three days after the start of "Mr. A. Mutt," Fisher introduced Mrs. Mutt and Cicero the cat into the strip and informed its readers that Mutt's first name was Augustus. By the beginning of the following month, the cartoonist had broadened Mutt's activities to include other adventures not associated with the racetrack.

¹"Wheeler Recalls Mutt and Jeff's 60 Year Story," (Interview), *Editor and Publisher*, November 11, 1967, p. 38.



Mutt and Jeff in a lively drawing from an early strip, about 1915. The original drawings in the Bud Fisher cartoon collection at Syracuse University seldom indicate the year in which they were drawn, showing only the day and month. This original drawing, part of a strip, is size 6¾" x 8". (George Arents Research Library for Special Collections, Syracuse University)

Sensing he was on to something big with his new brainchild, Fisher copyrighted the original strips, thus establishing ownership of the title and the characters. Fisher always had a sharp head for business — a trait that would stand him in good stead as he rose up the ladder of success.

It wasn't long before Hearst invited Fisher to bring "Mr. A. Mutt" over to the pages of the *Examiner*, with a healthy increase in salary.

When Fisher agreed to go with Hearst the transition from one paper to the other was literally made overnight. On December 10, 1907, the final episode of "Mr. A. Mutt" appeared in the *Chronicle*, and the following day, the first episode of the strip appeared in the *Examiner*. Observers wondered if Fisher might have drawn his strip for the *Examiner* in the cab that transported him from one newspaper office to the other!

The editor of the *Chronicle* attempted to carry on the strip without Bud Fisher, but by June 1908, the bogus "Mr. A. Mutt" was cancelled. The substitute artist (Russ Westover, who would later star as the creator of "Tillie the Toiler") "killed off" Mutt in his final episode, much to the amusement of Bud Fisher.

On March 27, 1908, Fisher introduced the pint-sized Jeff into his *Examiner* strip. According to John Wheeler, Jeff made his appearance in the strip after Fisher went to Reno for the Johnson-Jeffries fight. Little Jeff had either escaped or was released from an insane asylum. When little Jeff first met Mutt, he claimed he was the cousin of Heavyweight Champion James L. Jeffries, hence the name Jeff.

As Jeff began appearing more frequently in Fisher's strip, a certain affinity developed, and thus was born one of the most famous duos in comic strip history.

In March 1908, William Randolph Hearst sent his new cartoonist star to New York, where "Mutt and Jeff" was prominently displayed in the *Journal*, although the linking of the two names in the strip's title would not occur until eight years later. Again the feature proved enormously successful. Bud Fisher had the knack of placing his characters right in the news of the day. When Fisher traveled, his pen and ink pals went right along with him, extracting humor from the day-to-day incidents they encountered.

The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics, published in 1977, offers reproductions (greatly reduced) of seven of these early 1908 "Mr. Mutt" strips, complete with the eight column captions (page 58). One such heading reads: "Mutt Spends His First Day in the Bughouse and Is Welcomed by All the Bugs."

In 1913 Bud Fisher severed his connections with Hearst and joined forces with John N. Wheeler, pioneer in the newspaper syndicate field.

Wheeler had founded the North American Newspaper Alliance at the turn of the century and was now head of his own syndicate. He offered Fisher \$1000.00 per week, plus sixty-percent of the gross sales, an unprecedented salary for a cartoonist up until that time. Wheeler then sold the strip to the *New York World*, Hearst's traditional rival, and offered the feature for world-wide distribution.

In an interview with *Editor and Publisher*, John Wheeler recalled: "...there was a lawsuit which made new law. The Hearst forces had planned to put out an imitation — drawn by an artist named Ed Mack — and had him preparing strips for several weeks before Fisher's departure. The court ruled the trademark and copyright were the property of the artist. Incidentally, in later years Fisher hired Ed Mack as an assistant."²

The title "Mutt and Jeff" first appeared over the strip on September 15th, 1916. That same year Fisher pictured "Mutt and Jeff" as part of the American expeditionary force, under General John J. Pershing, which marched into Mexico to pursue the renegade leader, Pancho Villa.

The following year John Wheeler tells us: "Bud Fisher went to Plattsburgh, where he got a commission as a second lieutenant, but there was a rule in the United States Army that he could not continue to do Mutt and Jeff while a soldier. He was transferred to the British forces and became a captain."³

A reproduction of a 1919 "Mutt and Jeff" strip shows Mutt still in the uniform of a doughboy in the American army. And so the characters continued to follow the news. As late as 1938, Fisher had his characters involved in the hysterical build-up for the second Louis-Schmeling fight. The cartoonist had Jeff working in Joe Louis' training camp as a sparring partner. On the day of the big fight, June 22, little Jeff fought in one of the preliminary bouts. He managed to defeat his opponent and was so overcome with confidence by his victory that he leaned through the ropes and shouted to Mutt that he was now ready to take on Louis *and* Schmeling simultaneously! (That was the fight which lasted but two minutes of the first round with Louis regaining the world championship.)

By the early 'twenties Bud Fisher had established himself as the richest and most famous comic-strip cartoonist in America. When the feature was transferred to the Bell Syndicate in 1921, Fisher was making \$4600.00 per week, and Mutt and Jeff were appearing in newspapers all over the civilized world. Fisher had proved that readers would buy a certain newspaper to read an outstanding strip when they knew that it would be there every day, year in and year out. Fisher and Wheeler had the circulation figures to prove it.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

CERTAINLY, I WANT
TO JOIN THE ARMY
AND FIGHT FOR
MY COUNTRY

VERY WELL!
SIGN HERE
AND THEN
I'LL TAKE YOU
IN FOR A
PHYSICAL AND EYE
EXAMINATION



Jeff at a World War I recruiting office. From the original strip, this cartoon is size 5¼" x 8". (George Arents Research Library for Special Collections, Syracuse University)



MARCH · 1932

After Bud Fisher won the copyright to "Mutt and Jeff," he became the target of the powerful publisher for whom he had once worked, William Randolph Hearst. When Fisher engaged in romantic escapades abroad in the late twenties, Hearst's gossip columnists on the *New York Journal* and *New York Mirror* attacked Fisher's flamboyant life-style. In this strip (one of a sequence released by the Bell Syndicate in March 1932), we see that Mutt has become a "Broadway columnist." With this series, Fisher exposed the columnists' method of spreading gossip by means of innuendo. (From the author's collection. Arranged to fit this page.)

The cartoonist owned a string of race horses, including a good share of national winners. Fisher began traveling with the international set, flitting from Europe to the United States and becoming involved with several world-famous beauties. His squabbles with two wives provided the newly developed tabloids with “scandal” copy. Hearst was particularly vindictive since his loss to Fisher in the courts and showed the cartoonist no mercy in personal attacks on Fisher through the gossip columnists on the *Journal* and *Mirror*.

Bud Fisher’s life-style was free and easy; he lived life to the hilt. He was wont to drive into a city that carried his strip in a chauffeur-driven limousine. He would alight at a neighborhood bar, and after a few drinks, ask if anyone knew who he was. When the query drew blank expressions from the patrons, Fisher would whip out a soft black pencil and a sheaf of yellow copy paper and proceed to draw “Mutt and Jeff.” As the amazed patrons crowded around, Fisher would order a round of drinks for all in the house. As the liquor flowed, the cartoonist’s drawings of Mutt and Jeff became saltier and saltier. As the raucous laughter filled the saloon, Fisher’s chauffeur would be invited to join in the fun. The cartoonist would object, “When I drink *he* stays sober — to drive me home. When *he* drinks, I stay sober — to drive him home!”⁴

By the time Fisher was ready to leave the bar, he had attracted a large and enthusiastic male audience. He generally did require the services of his chauffeur to return to his shiny black limousine and his hotel room in the city.

As his fame and fortune grew, Fisher became less and less interested in the daily chore of producing the daily strip and Sunday page. (The Sunday page had been appearing since August 11, 1918.) About 1920 Fisher hired an obscure cartoonist named Billy Liverpool to assist him. Liverpool had created a short-lived strip, “Asthma Simpson, the Village Queen” and had also drawn “Mutt and Jeff” for Hearst before the lawsuit granted Fisher all the rights to his creation. It was during this period that Mutt and Jeff saw other characters added to their domain: Gus Geevum, Sir Sidney (from Mutt’s World War I acquaintance), Jeff’s twin brother Julius, and others. According to Bill Blackbeard, founder of the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art, writing about Bud Fisher in *The World Encyclopedia of Comics*: “Fisher’s instinct was right. Liverpool’s raucously comic drawings made “Mutt and Jeff” the most visually funny strip of the 1920’s.”

⁴ An actual eye-witness account of Bud Fisher’s visit to a saloon in the Manayunk district of Philadelphia was told to the author in 1922 by an elderly man named Edward Miller, a life-long resident of the town. Miller worked at the Manayunk station on the Reading Railroad as a warehouse foreman. The author also worked at the station during the summer of 1922 and got to know Miller well.

MUTT AND JEFF—THE BOYS EXPECTED "CORN" IN THE BOTTLE— NOT ON THE COB—



“Mutt and Jeff” as published in 1925. (Photograph from the author’s collection. Strip has been arranged to fit this page.)

However, according to Blackbeard, after Liverpool's departure from the strip in late 1933 and the subsequent hiring of Al Smith as Fisher's assistant, some of the popularity of the strip dropped off. "Most of the old fantasy and hi-jinks drained out of the strip in the late thirties and forties," he wrote, "and it became little more than a routine gag strip, as it is today."⁵

After Bud Fisher's death on September 7, 1954, Al Smith continued to produce "Mutt and Jeff" for the Bell Syndicate, which later became the Bell-McClure Syndicate. Today the strip is distributed by the McNaught Syndicate and the copyright line reads: "A Edita S. deBeaumont - All World Rights Reserved." (This refers to the estate of Fisher's last wife.)

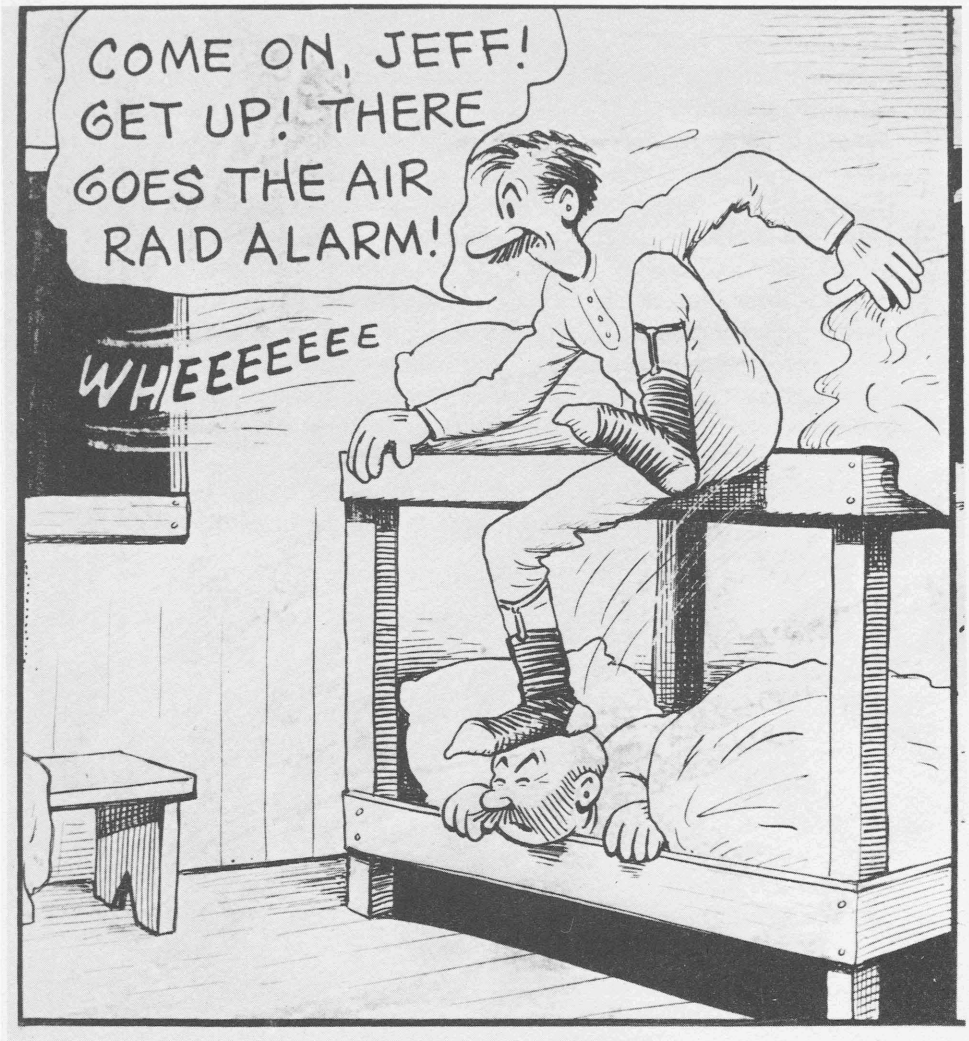
Through the years Bud Fisher augmented his vast income with many enterprises relating to "Mutt and Jeff." He contributed an article to the *Saturday Evening Post*, running from July 28 to August 18, 1928, titled: "Confessions of a Cartoonist." There were also several musical productions of "Mutt and Jeff" playing around the country in the 'twenties. The comic pair starred in their own series of animated cartoons, shown in theatres during the 'twenties and 'thirties. A ballet and a hit song, called "The Funny Paper Blues," also added to Fisher's royalty income in the early twenties. There were countless dolls, games, and other novelties on the market in those glory years, all of which added to the lustre and the income of the famed cartoonist. Most of Fisher's vast income was made before the income tax skimmed off much of an individual's earnings.

Books and comic magazines by the scores added another source of income to Fisher's fortune. There had been collections of Fisher's daily strips in hard-cover books as early as 1911 through 1914. These were 5¾" by 15½" in size, black and white, published by Ball Publications. Reproductions of black and white daily strips were published by Cupples & Leon Co. These were 16" by 11", with 48 pages each, covering the years 1916 through 1933.

The *Mutt and Jeff Big Books* (No. 1, 1928 and No. 2, 1929) were hard-cover books with dust jackets. The Embee Publishing Co. distributed two Mutt and Jeff books, size 9" by 15", for the years 1920 and 1921. The same company also issued a book of Sunday strips in color.

With the advent of the popular ten-cent comic book in the early 'forties, Mutt and Jeff enjoyed a new popularity with the small fry of the land. Children seemed to appreciate the zany slapstick quality of the ageless comic partners and eagerly bought the magazines.

⁵ *World Encyclopedia of Comics*, Maurice Horn, ed., New York: Chelsea House, 1976.



Mutt and Jeff in the U.S. Army early in World War II. Timeliness and liveliness show the cartoon at its best. Note that Mutt and Jeff have been sleeping with their gloves on. From the original strip, this drawing is size 7¼" x 7¼". (George Arents Research Library for Special Collections, Syracuse University)

According to *The Comic Book Price Guide*, No. 8, 1978-79, by Robert M. Overstreet, from the summer of 1940 until November 1965, there were one hundred forty-eight Mutt and Jeff comic books published by various companies. Number 74 was the last book bearing Bud Fisher's signature. From Number 86 on they were by Al Smith. Issues since 1963 have been Fisher reprints. Overstreet explains that many earlier issues signed by Fisher were mostly drawn by Smith. As for the re-sale value at present of these old comic books, Numbers 1, 2 and 3 are worth \$90.00, \$45.00 and \$30.00 respectively.

By the time of his death, Fisher had little left of the vast wealth he had earned over a period of forty-seven years. He had been seriously ill for about seven years before the end and unable to work, lavish living and extravagance had taken its toll. Fisher was a complicated, talented man. He leaves us with a legacy of an American art form which will continue to grow despite competition from many other fields.

"Mutt and Jeff" may still be seen in some of the nation's dailies, but the strip's size and importance has been greatly diminished.

* * * * *

A Note About Bud Fisher's "Ghosts"

Bud Fisher employed several assistants during his lifetime in the production of "Mutt and Jeff." George Herriman was an early associate of Fisher's; Herriman's later creation, "Krazy Kat," reflected the "Mutt and Jeff" style. Ken Kling was another cartoonist who owed his start to Bud Fisher. Kling's "Joe and Asbestos," a horse-racing strip, became enormously popular during the mid-'twenties and 'thirties. Perhaps the assistant who, more than any other, influenced "Mutt and Jeff," was an obscure cartoonist named Billy Liverpool. He worked with Fisher as early as 1920. He brought a raucous humor to "Mutt and Jeff" that continued until Al Smith joined the Fisher studio in late 1932 or early 1933.

While Fisher maintained complete control over the strip's contents and frequently added his own continuity, there were many periods when Bud was in Europe for months at a time. It was during these periods that the various "ghosts" had the chance to show their own creative talents. A study of the early strips shows a vast variation in the style of drawing and lettering in the strip. Mutt and Jeff were easy to draw — many budding cartoonists began their careers copying Mutt and Jeff from the daily paper. But the lettering style of each cartoonist is distinctive.

It is possible that Bud Fisher employed more than one assistant at any given time. According to the *World Encyclopedia of Comics* in its sketch on Al Smith, a cartoonist named Ed Mack was Bud Fisher's "ghost" when Smith became Fisher's assistant in 1932. Born in Brooklyn in 1902, Smith was doing odd jobs around the John Wheeler Syndicate at the time, and he frequently worked on "Mutt and Jeff." Smith's job was not an easy one, for Fisher was a stern task-master. A heavy drinker, Fisher frequently became abusive with those around him. Slowly but surely, as Smith gained more control over the content of "Mutt and Jeff," Mutt became almost a "home-body" and the language in the strip became more "genteel." Jeff began to court a few girls (Enee and Chlorine), and the dog, Bruno, was introduced into the strip. "Cicero's Cat" became a separate feature running on top of the Sunday page.

Smith's work was also more polished than that of his predecessors, even though the continuities were less venturesome and slapstick. Not until after Bud Fisher's death in 1954 was Al Smith allowed to sign the strip, although he had been doing the entire feature for the previous half-dozen years. The rights to the strip remained the property of Bud Fisher's widow, the French Countess Edita de Beaumont.

In 1950 Al Smith founded his own syndicate, The Smith Service, to supply features to weekly newspapers. He drew "Rural Delivery" and "Remember When" for this service, while Joe Dennett and George Wolfe supplied additional cartoons.

Al Smith has played an active role in the National Cartoonists' Society for many years and served as its president in 1967-69. The cartoonist now employs "ghosts" of his own to help with "Mutt and Jeff." It still remains a favorite in a large list of newspapers and, presumably, could grace America's comic-pages indefinitely.

It might be added that Al Smith has become noted for his work with young cartoonists. He has been responsible for helping many of them get started in successful careers.

Ray Thompson

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