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Notes from a Cartoonist

Edward D. Kuekes

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THE LOWER YOSEMITE FALLS

From a Carleton E. Watkins album at Syracuse University

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Notes from a Cartoonist

by Edward D. Kuekes

Mr. Edward D. Kuekes is cartoonist emeritus of The Cleveland Plain-Dealer. He has won many awards for his work including the Pulitzer Prize in 1953. His papers have been given to the manuscripts collection at the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections at Syracuse University.*

An editorial cartooning career comes under the category of getting paid for something that you really enjoy doing. During my years at the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* as chief editorial cartoonist, I was never told by the editor or editorial writers what to draw. I had free rein in the choice of subject matter. The editor, of course, could tell me what not to draw. With this type of set-up there is a kind of moral imperative to do the job right.

After working on the paper as long as I had, I was not apt to go off the deep end. Yet, sometimes an ethic might be violated when you least suspected it. I recall using a Chinese laundry as an analogy in one of my early cartoons. It was rejected by the editor: "Why go out of your way to antagonize a minority group?" He was right. (I might add that that cartoon was the first and only cartoon rejected in my forty-four years with the *Plain Dealer*.)

Years later, I was to discover the power of the minority. It had been a dull day in the middle of January, my mind was devoid of ideas. The first edition of the opposition afternoon paper had just been delivered to my desk when I noticed a one-column box saying that the Russian community of Cleveland would be celebrating Christmas.

Suddenly I got a silly hunch. The song, "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer," was at its height. "I'll draw Santa Claus harnessing Rudolph to his sleigh. For Rudolph's antlers, I'll use two symbols of Russia, the hammer and sickle," I said to myself. I thought it was a rather cute idea. After publication, the Russian community had other ideas!

*Mr. Kuekes has won forty-six awards, including an honorary doctorate from his alma mater, Baldwin-Wallace College of Berea, Ohio.

They came en masse to the *Plain Dealer* building to complain. When they sent a committee to the editor, I hastened to his office to make myself known. The most vocal member of the group, a man of the cloth, said, "So — you're the fellow I should punch in the nose." I wasn't much concerned, he was a very small person. We argued, and, after talking for half an hour, they were finally mollified and left, apparently satisfied.

They had been angry because I had used the hammer and sickle, the emblem of *Red* Russia to illustrate their Christmas. They were White Russians and wanted it understood that they in no way were connected with the Red regime.

* * * * *

I enjoyed the responsibilities of being my own man. If the cartoons were good, they were mine; and if they were not, they still were mine. I never had the temperament to do the vitriolic cartoon. My most powerful weapon was ridicule, a subtle way to deflate the most bombastic character.

At the time the Newspaper Guild was organized at the *Plain Dealer* I was pressured about joining the organization. I steadfastly refused, feeling that if I felt compelled at any time to draw a cartoon lambasting the A.F.L. or C.I.O. of which I was a member, loyalty would prompt me to pull my punches or disregard the idea entirely. I couldn't be true to myself, so I never joined.

In later years, during a newspaper strike, the sports editor and the cartoonist seemed to be the bone of contention. The Guild wanted us in their jurisdiction. When the strike was finally settled the sports editor went with the Guild and the cartoonist went with management. The Guild proved to be a good thing for many staff members; it improved their lot, especially the distaff side of the paper.

* * * * *

On days when ideas seemed few and far between, and deadlines kept creeping up, and my easel showed nothing but a blank piece of paper, I was subject to severe headaches. It was such a day on the fourth of May, 1953. Mrs. Kuekes had called to say that she had driven to town to do some shopping and would pick me up on her way home. I mentioned that I had a severe headache and would retire to bed as soon as we arrived home.

As I opened the door, I heard the phone frantically ringing. I raised the receiver to mumble a feeble, "Hello" when the voice of the managing editor shouted, "Congratulations!"

I said, "Thank you, for what?"

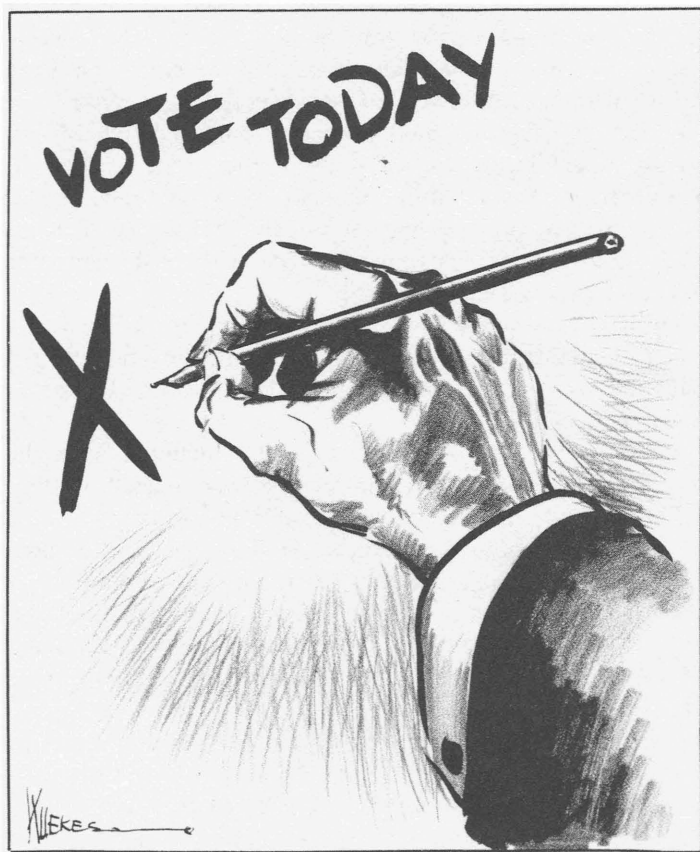
"You have just won the Pulitzer Prize," he said.

My headache vanished like a flash. I can heartily recommend the cure. It beats aspirin, Anacin, Bufferin or Tylenol.



AFTERMATH

The 1953 Pulitzer Prize Cartoon by Edward D. Kuekes.
Courtesy of Mr. Kuekes and the Cleveland Plain Dealer.



EVERY ELECTION *IS* IMPORTANT

One of the three thousand original cartoons by Edward D. Kuekes in the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections, showing the draftsmanship and strength of his drawing and composition.

I had many pleasant things happen to me while I was chief editorial cartoonist for the *Plain Dealer*. The job afforded me the privilege of meeting Presidents Hoover, Eisenhower, Johnson, Kennedy, Nixon and Ford. The flag which flew over the Capitol on my birthday in 1964 was presented to me by the United States Treasury Department. The Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge has honored me on numerous occasions. I was fortunate to win first prize in the very first Freedoms Foundation Awards competition in 1949 (Cartoon Division). A check for \$2000.00 and an American flag were presented to me by General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

This is how the winning cartoon was chosen to be sent to the contest. The managing editor Mr. Stanley Barnett had received a telegram stating that I had been nominated to enter the Freedoms Foundation cartoon contest, would I please send six cartoons?

That evening Mr. Barnett and I went through a batch of cartoons to select six possibilities. As we were in the process, Mrs. Kuekes entered my office. When I told her what we were doing, she silently looked over the drawings we had tentatively chosen. Then, to cut the number down to six entrants, we started to discard them until we had the six cartoons that satisfied us.

Looking at the discards, Mrs. Kuekes said, "But I like this one." I protested saying that the appeal of the cartoon she selected was too local; and as this contest was of national scope, I felt that her choice wouldn't qualify.

She insisted, and the cartoon was finally included with the five others. To shorten a long story, her choice was selected as the grand winner. The cartoon was titled, "The Qualifying Steps."

Here is the story behind the cartoon. At staff meeting the discussion had been about President Truman's tardiness in appointing a new federal judge for our district. When editor Paul Bellamy asked me what I had planned to do for the next day's paper, I replied that I would do something about the federal judge appointment. His reply was, "It's not cartoonable."

Sitting before a blank piece of drawing paper, as the hours passed, I was almost ready to agree with Mr. Bellamy. My brain was devoid of ideas. In desperation I took a quick hike to the Federal Building. I wanted to see the court room. I thought it might give me an inspiration.

The courtroom was locked! I looked up the custodian, explained my plight, and he obligingly opened the door.

I was immediately impressed with the grandeur of the room. The warm wood-paneled walls and the heavy drapes at the windows lent a dignity and charm that I hadn't expected. There were three steps to the judge's podium. "That's it! I would label the three steps as necessary qualifications for the vacancy...simple..." The first



First prize cartoon by Edward D. Kuekes, editorial cartoonist, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. General Dwight D. Eisenhower presented Kuekes with an American flag, a gold medal, and a check for \$2,000.00 at the ceremonies November 21, 1949 at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, headquarters of the Freedoms Foundation. *Courtesy of Mr. Kuekes and the Cleveland Plain Dealer.*

step was labeled, *Honesty — Integrity*, the second step, *Vast Experience*, and the third, *Free From Political Bias*. So the caption was “The Qualifying Steps.”

* * * * *

I would like to mention in this piece, the wonderful and speedy help given me by the staff of the Cleveland Public Library. I had two quite complete four-drawer files of alphabetized morgue material of my own. They knew that when I called, the need was urgent. They had one fault, and it was a good one. They were too efficient! Having produced just what I needed, they would continue to bring me books and clippings to bolster their selection.

As you might expect, I have a very warm spot in my heart for Bird Library at Syracuse University, the home for all my brain children. I was greatly impressed when I first visited the campus at the time of the dedication of the Newhouse Communications Center.

Someone once remarked that anyone watching an editorial cartoonist at work will agree that it is the most grueling of professional grinds. More than most creative workers, they have difficulty taking-off even after they have settled on an idea. For every cartoon has a dozen or so approaches; and often cartoonists make innumerable drafts before settling on an idea. Cartoonists invariably sit at their drawing-boards during the period of gestation. Thus, for hours, they stew in their own juices until they get an idea and then, often finish their work in a matter of a single hour.

Most cartoonists I have known will take an oath almost daily that they will never draw another cartoon. Then, the following day, when they see their efforts in print, there generally comes a feeling of wonderful fulfillment; and they come to the conclusion that editorial cartooning is the most rewarding of professions.