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A Rural Nebraska Boy's Comic Strip Narrative of World War II

Mike Kugler

Northwestern College - Orange City, kugler@nwcsiowa.edu

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A Rural Nebraska Boy's Comic Strip Narrative of World War II

Abstract

The comics drawn by James "Jimmy" Kugler (the author's father) when he was 13 in 1945 and living in Lexington, Nebraska provide a microhistorical perspective on at least four things. First, they offer a glimpse of an adolescent boy's life in small town America during the mid-twentieth century. The strips took local buildings and situations and turned them into something strange, reflecting some of Jimmy's loneliness and alienation. Further, they "back talked" the adults in charge of school and town. Second, they manifest the power of a dynamic American popular culture at the time. Jimmy's war comic strips depict fairly simple characters, cinematic perspectives like close-ups or long distance, and framing from newsreels and combat films. The Frogs that he created reflect elements of cartoon figures of the era, including Ub Iwerk's "Flip the Frog." Third, they illustrate how a child's imagination transposed a distant yet hard-to-escape war into a reflection of aspects of a world marked by authority and violence. The media portrait of World War II gave Jimmy authoritative permission to revel in mayhem, brutality, and spectacular destruction. The local coverage of the war reported more on the Pacific war with Japan than the war in Europe, and the behavior of Jimmy's Toads in their war with the Frogs generally echoed common media portraits of the Japanese. Finally, Kugler's war comic storytelling readily reshaped itself after the war into stories of violent crime and horror, paralleling how comic book taste more generally was moving in similar directions.

About the Author

Dr. Kugler primarily teaches European history from the Reformation through the modern era. His research and writing include the Enlightenment era, particularly in Scotland; historical narrative in a variety of forms, including formal history but also film and graphic novels; and more recently, the history of incarnational theology. He has presented papers at a wide variety of conferences and has published reviews and essays in *Fides et Historia*, *The Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation*, and *Scotia*.

A Rural Nebraska Boy’s Comic Strip Narrative of World War II

by Mike Kugler, Ph.D.

What do we know of the history of children’s inner lives, their imaginations? Very little. What we know is almost exclusively from testimony by adults about children, or adults recalling their experiences many years later. Children are now the subject of historical research on their experience of significant events. Histories of American domestic life concentrate on how children experienced World War II from home. Yet this subject also derives most of its evidence from adult interpretations of children’s experiences, and grown-ups remembering key moments from that era.¹ Testimonies of children from that time, in letters, stories, or spoken accounts are just too vulnerable to time and neglect. This is no different for American children as witnesses to domestic life during the Second World War.² Until recently, it is not clear that historians

¹ Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Gary Cross, *Kids’ Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004); Kriste Lindenmeyer, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930s* (Chicago: Dee, 2005). Also: Peter N. Stearns, “Challenges in the History of Childhood”, *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008), 35-42; Paula S. Fass, “Childhood and Memory”, *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 3, no. 2 (2010), 155-164; Henry Jenkins, “Introduction,” in *The Children’s Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 25.

² William M. Tuttle, Jr., *“Daddy’s Gone to War”: The Second World War in the Lives of America’s Children* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Philip D. Beidler, *The Good War’s Greatest Hits: World War II and American Remembering* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Emmy E. Werner, *Through the Eyes of*

cared enough about the experiences of children as witnesses to the war at home to seek such sources.

Just as low on most historians’ radar have been comic books as a source of cultural history. Yet that too is changing.³ In the last two decades both the history of childhood and the history of popular culture through the comic book have emerged together as serious, well-researched subjects.

This essay offers a story of both: a Midwest boy’s comic strip retelling of the Pacific War. James “Jimmy” Kugler was 13 years old in 1945, living with his father in Lexington, Nebraska. He left behind over one hundred sheets with comics drawn typically on both sides; over half of them portray the war. Reading these comics lets us into the imagination of a white small-town boy during an epic era of American history. They begin to make sense as a child’s interpretation of the war from the perspective of small town America. They do so alongside other sources: a range of local newspapers, as well as comic books, radio dramas and movies, and interviews with people who knew Jimmy as a boy and heard his adult memories of childhood. These comics represent the recovery of part of the life of a single person in its rich historical setting.

Imagine the teacher snatching this from a student’s hands (Figure 1):

Innocents: Children Witness World War II (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000); Lisa L. Ossian, *The Forgotten Generation: American Children and World War II* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2011).

³ William W. Savage, Jr., *Combies, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990); Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1994); Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2003); David Hajdu, *The Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How it Changed America* (New York: Picador, 2009); Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Knopf, 2014); Aldo J. Regalado, *Bending Steel: Modernity and the American Superhero* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 2015).

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Figure 1

Looking at this, you should wonder, “What is the history of this kid’s inner life?” What would this kid draw to imagine if the War in the Pacific came to his home? (Figure 2)

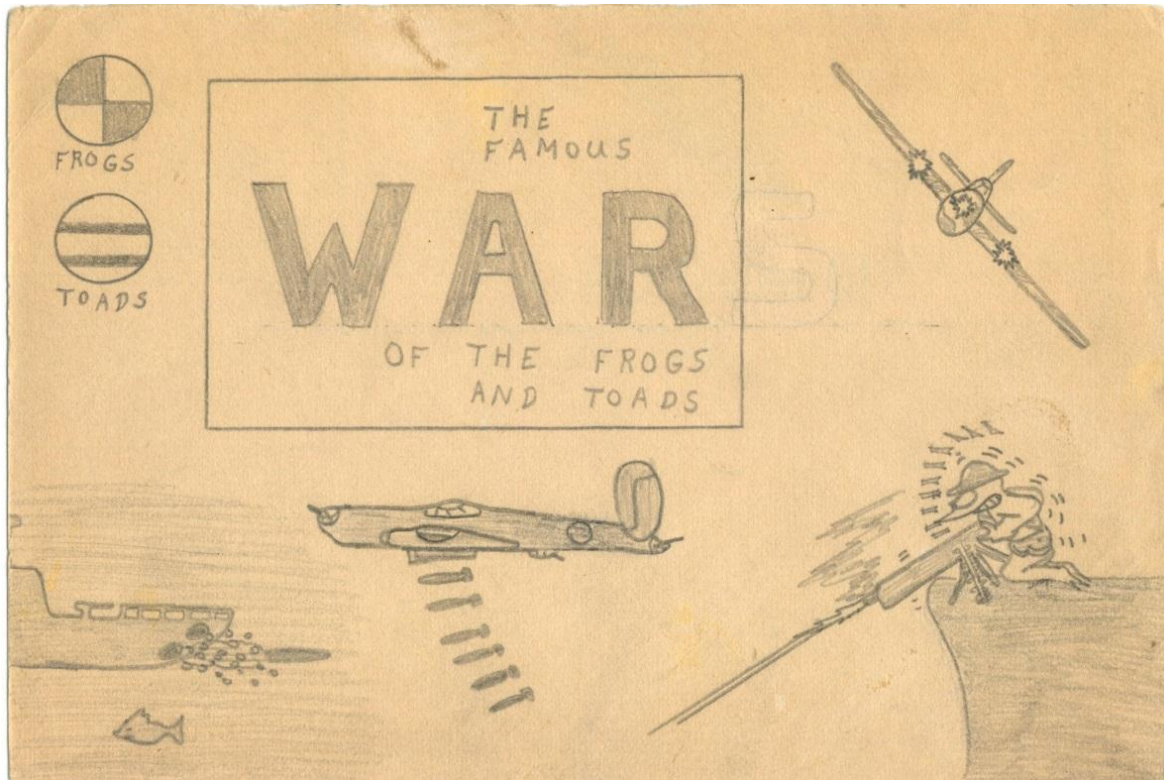


Figure 2

In that sense it is perfect for a history of what seems obvious, taken for granted. It is perfect for the historian fascinated with the smallest element of historical narrative study: the individual.

This large collection of adolescent drawings, concentrating first on the war in the Pacific and then developing stories of violence in gradually more grotesque and comic ways responded to an adult culture moving in seemingly different directions.⁴ One path followed a rural educational culture. Its devotion to domesticating children and fostering obedience, morality, and

⁴The drawings have been in my possession since my father’s death in 1969. I’ve modeled this project on microhistorical approaches represented especially by Joseph A. Amato, *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2002), and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, "The Contours of Social History. Microhistory, Postmodernism and Historical Sources." *Mod nye historier. Rapporter til Det 24. Nordiske Historikermøde 3*. Redigeret af Carsten Tag Nielsen, Dorthe Gert Simonsen og Lene Wul (Århus 2001), pp. 83-107, <http://www.akademia.is/sigm/contours.html> (accessed June 17, 2010).

personal hygiene in future citizens were intensified during in the war. This energetic and progressive educational system was central to a range of organizations and programs intended to meet a “youth crisis” of delinquency. The crisis included the growth of unemployment among young people during the Depression, their problems with too much free time while unsupervised by their parents, and their increasing role as consumers.⁵ The other direction taken by adult culture was the national state at war. This national war culture used the radio, movies, and papers to suggest a coordinated civic authority that united private citizens against tyranny, defending military violence justified by patriotic necessity. A creative adolescent living under each authoritative culture, Jimmy Kugler’s drawings depict the dynamic thrill of fighting, even the anarchism of violence, and show the student “back talking” the adults in charge.⁶ There is no surprise in a kid’s disrespect for his elders. But there are not many records of sustained, detailed talking back which suggest what he read, watched, and heard. The drawings I’ll discuss are an archive of one American adolescent’s understanding of the experience of war as he received it in popular culture. These drawings also mark the evolution of that experience into the dreamscape of the early popular culture of horror and the macabre in the 1950s.⁷ How can a kid move from war stories to others about a jungle, a castle, or a room full of sword-fighting, bat-winged frogs?

⁵ For the youth “crisis” see James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), and Palladino, *Teenagers*.

⁶ For children’s storytelling see Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 121-2, 158-9, 162-3. For post-war remembering, where soon after 1945 “the Good War” generated its own self-representations and propaganda, see Beidler, *The Good War’s Greatest Hits*, 17.

⁷ Consider the interviews in Hajdu, *The Ten Cent Plague*; Jack Cole’s childhood drawings can be found in Art Spiegelman and Chip Kidd, *Jack Cole and Plastic Man: Forms Stretched to Their Limits* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001).

Lexington was a railroad hub and county seat of about 3600, surrounded by crops and livestock yards.⁸ Local newspapers reported the minor tragedies of farm accidents, explosions, train crossing deaths, auto collisions on rural roads, vandalism, thefts, and fights. For reassurance the paper and official media organs boosted Lexington across Nebraska as the “greatest little city in the country.”⁹ Stress from the Depression found relief in entertainment and spectacle (home grown or sent from the wide world): local festivals, rodeo and high school sports, missionary and evangelical meetings, a Halloween parade of costumed children each fall. Lexington’s seamier side paraded through the courtrooms and papers, in murder trials or deaths of locally notorious criminals.

Like most places the war changed Lexington. Before Pearl Harbor local editorials opposed American intervention while the pages were lined with advertisements depicting military vehicles and accounts of Japanese aggression in Asia. During Plum Creek Days in June 1941, the *Clipper* and the *Herald* ran photos of a Lexington man dressed as a Greek soldier with a rifle chasing someone dressed as Mussolini.¹⁰ During the war the paper ran reports of local men and women serving and the difficulty of keeping public school teachers from enlisting or leaving for better paying jobs at defense plants along with editorials lamenting the slack local sales of war bonds.¹¹ German POWs were held in the state, some in camps near Lexington.¹²

⁸ Nebraska Department of Economic Development, “Population of Nebraska Incorporated Places, 1930 To 1980,” <http://www.neded.org/files/research/stathand/bsect5b.htm> (accessed October 31, 2011).

⁹*Clipper*, December 28, 1939. “A Progressive Community”, “one of Nebraska’s finest small cities”, in *Yellow Pages*, Lexington [telephone directory], 1948, the Nebraska State Historical Society. Part of the self-promotion of the community appeared in paid full-page advertising for the modern character of the local schools; for one example see *Clipper*, August 27, 1942.

¹⁰ June 8, 1941.

¹¹On war bond drives: *Clipper*, September 23, 1943 and November 4, 1943; half the local school teachers in the fall were new hires, August 12, 1943.

Nebraska had several Army Air Corps bases, and young pilots regularly trained overhead.¹³

Beneath a cloud of anxiety evangelists offered big public prophecy seminars.¹⁴

Jimmy’s father, Otto Carl Kugler, was the son of immigrants, a typesetter for the *Lexington Clipper*.¹⁵ He along with many other Lexington men in the 1920s joined the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁶ Otto fortunately stayed employed through the Depression. In the 1940s his family moved around a good deal, living in at least four different small houses, probably on and off living with grandmother Marie in her small home.¹⁷ As an adult Jimmy remembered an unhappy childhood. He was the only child born to a forty year old man and a woman eight years younger. Both parents drank; his mother Daisy was a hairdresser at The Modern Beauty Shop where Jimmy swept the floor after school.¹⁸ After Daisy walked out they divorced, possibly in 1945.¹⁹ Jimmy was raised mostly by his father and on occasion by his grandmother, but she died in 1940 when he was eight. He remembered coming home to an empty house from watching a horror movie. He was so frightened to be alone with the wind and trees scratching at the windows, he

¹² *Clipper*, May 21 1945; “German War Prisoner Died of Heart Attack” while working at the Meyer Milling Company east of Lexington.

¹³ There were bases as close as Kearney and Grand Island. Three crashes occurred near the Kearney base, one in Bertrand, about twenty miles south of Lexington, and one in Wellfleet, about seventy miles west. Jerry Penry, “Nebraska’s Fatal Air Crashes of WWII”, at <http://www.nebraskaaircrash.com/main.html> (visited June 7, 2011). A captured German tank, an ME 109, and Italian fighter were brought for display as close as Grand Island, August 4-5, 1943; <http://www.nebraskaaircrash.com/events/display.html> (visited June 7, 2011).

¹⁴ *Clipper*, November 18, 1943; January 6, 1944.

¹⁵ Obituary on Otto Kugler, *Clipper*, May 1966.

¹⁶ Otto’s wife Daisy declared this to the author but it is probably impossible to verify. Michael W. Schuyler, “The Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, 1920-1930,” *Nebraska History* 66 (1985), 234-56. Lexington had a chapter; Russ Czaplewski, *Plum Creek to Lexington 1866-1939* ([Lexington, NE]: Dawson County Historical Society, 1989), 95.

¹⁷ *Yellow Pages*, Lexington [telephone directories], 1932-50, Nebraska State Historical Association and the Dawson County Historical Society. Four different addresses for Otto Kugler are given in those directories. They are listed at 1308 N. Madison in 1939 and 1940, and not listed from after Marie’s death in 1941 to 1948.

¹⁸ Marilyn Larson and Bonnie Tuma, interviews by the author, July 31, 2010, written notes, p.1, 2; Patricia Kugler, interview by author.

¹⁹This incident is important but I have not turned up the record of the divorce in any county records.

would grab the kitchen knives and lay them on the table next to his bed. These tiny houses still stand, mute testimony to a boy’s life alone with an alcoholic father in his fifties (Figure 3).



Figure 3

Marie Kugler's home (Jimmy’s residence from 1941-48). Image from the author.

But no one who remembered Lexington then considered Jimmy either happy or unhappy (Figure 4).



Second row: Coach Grote, O. Reiker, J. Mallett, R. Bredenkamp, W. Owens, J. Young, E. Kirwan, J. Randecker.
First row: J. Reynolds, G. Kreitz, L. Phillippi, J. Kugler, R. Brown, B. McKee, B. Aten.

Figure 4

Jimmy Kugler (#7) on the junior high school basketball team. Image from the Lexington High School yearbook, *The Minuteman*, 1948, Dawson County Historical Society.

He was an athlete and a good student, regularly picked to draw seasonal blackboard decorations for Halloween, Christmas, or Easter. In December 1941 Jimmy’s fourth grade class followed the war in geography and history. Like many American kids he probably participated in scrap drives and bought stamps to raise money for military equipment.²⁰ Some of his distant relatives served in the military. What did the war change for him? It gave him a rudimentary filter through which he could retell in new ways its stories to himself.²¹

The Drawings

Jimmy’s war comic strips depict fairly simple characters, cinematic perspectives like close-ups or long distance, and framing from newsreels and combat films. He drew bombers above a target, planes strafing ships, and sailors firing on a beach. Often he drew hand-to-hand

²⁰ *Clipper*, February 26, 1941, December 9, 1943, January 6, 1944, February 24, 1944, and November 16, 1944; December 17, 1942, February 18, 1943, and March 25, 1943.

²¹ Carlos Ginzburg explained the concept of a filter in *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedushci (Baltimore: MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), xi-xii, xv.

combat. Jimmy had a straight-forward sense of cartoon storytelling in the image and cartoon frame.²²

The war comics—“The Famous War of the Frogs and Toads”—includes the stories “What Started the War,” “The Fate of a Toad Convoy,” “The Battle of Toadajima,” “The Fall of Eagle Island,” and “The Fall of Frogington” (an incomplete episode). He probably drew these before the horror and humorous comics he drew later. According to a former classmate, Jimmy and his best friend Jack Kutz (Lexington High School, Class of 1950) invented the “Frogs” and were constantly drawing them in and out of class (Figure 5).

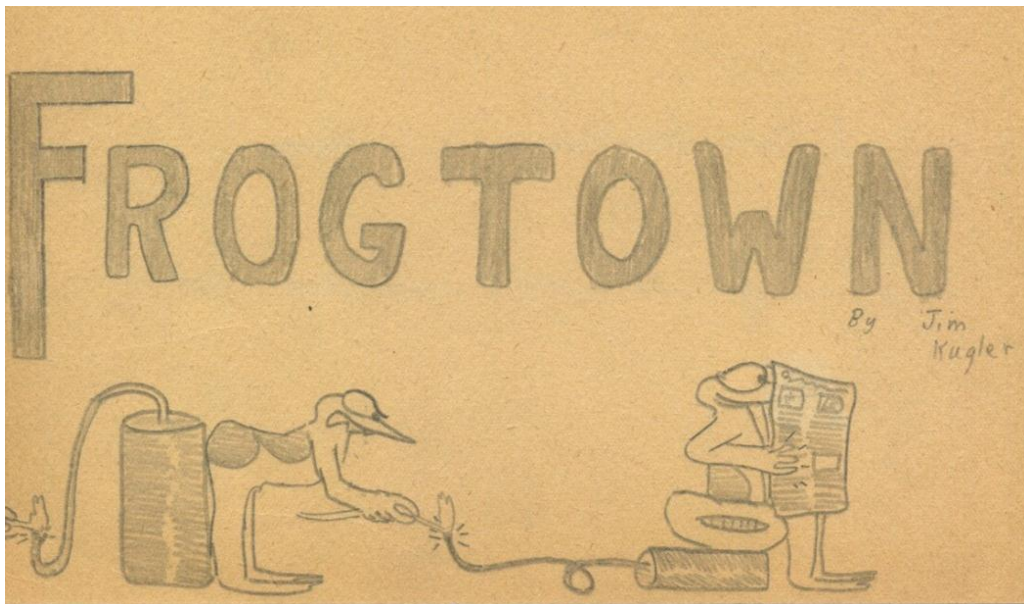


Figure 5

Throughout those school years the *Lexington Clipper* reported that Jimmy and other classmates often displayed their art in class, whether on the blackboard during the holidays or

²² On the creative diversity of comic perspective see McCloud, *Understanding Comics*.

posted elsewhere in the classroom.²³ Cartooning seems to have been part of the curriculum.²⁴

“Funny animal” cartoons are an old tradition. Jimmy’s Frogs stand upright, thin, with distinctive sharp faces and an overbite. Their oversized rounded eyes are typical of cartoon figures. Evil or cruel Frogs had narrowed eyes and sharp teeth. Occasionally these Frogs (or “Toads” in the war cartoons) are larger, darker, or hairier (Figure 6).

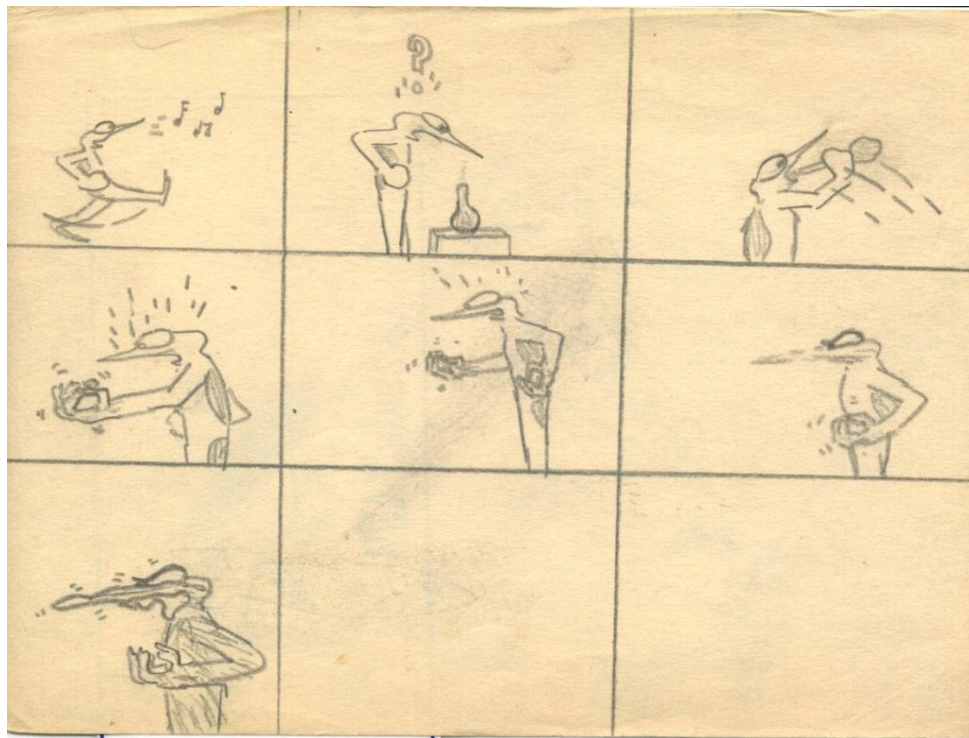


Figure 6

²³ *Clipper*, December 14, 1939 (second grade), November 14, 1940 (third grade), October 16, 1941, October 30, 1941, December 4, 1941 (fourth grade). On October 21, 1943 his friend Jack Kutz received recognition for drawing historical ships for a classroom unit. Jimmy was recognized later (April 27, 1944) for drawings on Africa.

²⁴ *Clipper*, February 14, 1946.

Why “Frogs”? Jimmy hunted, and he often caught wild creatures; he also kept scrapbooks of pictures of birds and other animals.²⁵ The thin angularity of the Frogs also resembles the salamanders in illustrations from a book he owned (Figure 7).²⁶

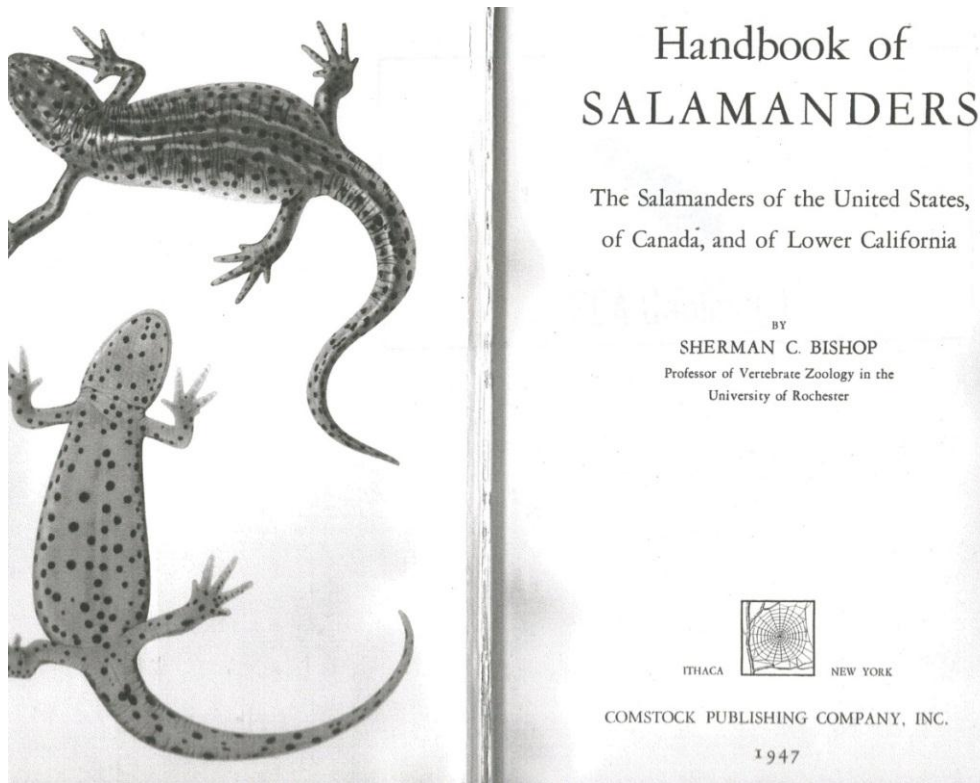


Figure 7

They also recall Ub Iwerk’s “Flip the Frog” animated character of the 1930s and 1940s.²⁷ Flip’s stocky neck-less body, broad mouth, and big round eyes were typical for an animated Frog. But

²⁵ For the first grade the *Clipper* (March 23, 1939) reported, “We think Jimmie Kugler must treasure that mouse he brought to school Thursday morning.” In the second grade Jimmy reportedly observed birds for class and made charts of them; February 22, 1940 and March 14, 1940. In the fourth grade hobby show, Jimmy brought his scrapbooks, “one of animal pictures, the other of airplanes” (September 25, 1941).

²⁶ Jimmy owned Sherman Bishop’s *Handbook of Salamanders* (1943) and kept it with his comic strip collection, some comic books and Big Little Books, his report cards, and high school diploma. With the exception of the comic books and Big Little Books, they remain in my possession.

²⁷ Iwerk started working for Walt Disney; he created Mickey Mouse and developed Flip for his own studio in a hiatus from working for Disney. For Disney’s critical role in marketing and shaping American childhood

some characteristics resemble those of Jimmy’s Frogs: long, thin arms and legs, upright walk, and sharply webbed feet (Figure 8).²⁸

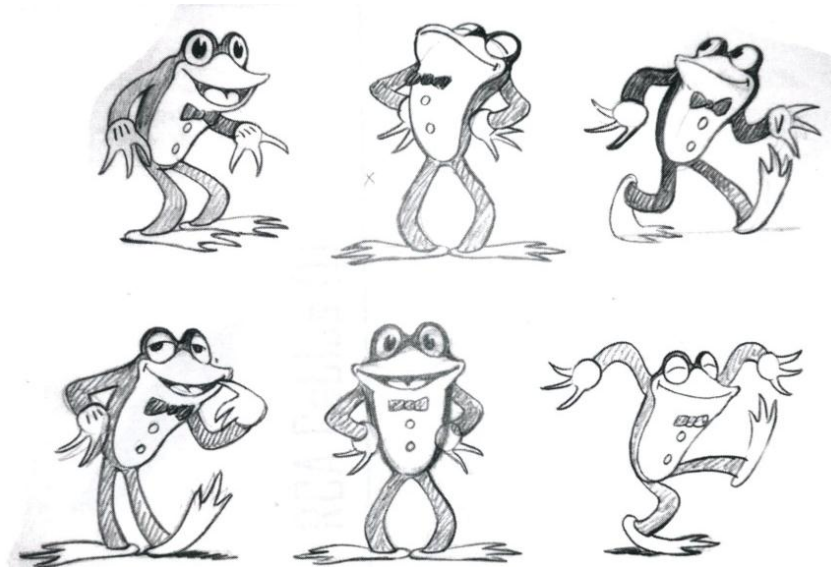


Figure 8

Ub Iwerk’s “Flip the Frog.”

Image from <http://animationguildblog.blogspot.com/2009/07/megacollectors-flip-frog.html>.

During the war the *Lexington Clipper* and *Dawson County Herald* ran little more than serious patriotic comics. Jimmy probably found comics in papers his father brought home and a few comic books, some Big Little Books, and re-prints of syndicated cartoon strips collected into small thick book form including some written narrative.

But comics were not Jimmy’s only influences. Beginning in the early twentieth century and accelerating into the 1930s children became targets of various marketing campaigns for toys

imagination see Howard P. Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 124-5. In the 1930s comic books and so-called fantasy toys were closely connected; see Cross, *Kids’ Stuff*, 100-102.

²⁸ *Clipper* for October 28, 1937 announced that, along with a film about Holland, Disney’s “Flippety the Frog” would be shown in the school auditorium.

often associated directly with radio program and film.²⁹ Radio and serialized pulp fiction were very popular and accessible to kids as well as adults, especially *The Shadow* and *The Whistler*.³⁰ Movies also seem to have filled Jimmy’s imagination. It would be no surprise that he spent a lot of his free time at the town’s two theaters, the Majestic and the Ralf, since his parents often left him alone (Figure 10).



Figure 10

Outside the Majestic Theater, Lexington, c.1950. Image from Dawson County Historical Association.

²⁹ Chudacoff, *Children at Play*, 98-9, 116-8; Lindenmeyer, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up*, 156-7; Cross, *Kids’ Stuff*, 89-91.

³⁰ Cross, *Kids’ Stuff*. For the detective and western dramas of the radio era, see J. Fred MacDonald, *Don’t Touch That Dial!: Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982). According to the *Clipper* (November 11, 1937), the comics were read aloud over the radio each Sunday from noon to 12:30.

In 1938 Lexington it cost 15, 25, or 35 cents to see comedies, dramas, and westerns. After Pearl Harbor, Hollywood poured out war movies. Dynamic paper ads like that for the Majestic’s feature *Hitler’s Madman* (“The Stark Story of the Rape of Lidice”) show a woman kneeling before a whip-wielding Nazi officer, her clothes slipping from her shoulder. “Captive women sentenced to a living death...the firing squad for all men...foul concentration camps for children!” (August 26, 1943). Less than a month later *Behind the Rising Sun* had its Midwest premier and guaranteed “harsh truths that will make you recoil with shocked amazement as you boil with fighting anger!” The ad seems far more suited to horror than war (Figure 11).³¹

³¹ This RKO picture was a sequel of sorts to the earlier *Hitler’s Children*. On this film’s character as vicious propaganda, see Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 31-4, and 137.

Figure 11
Ad from the *Lexington Clipper* (September 16, 1943).

Even ads for war bonds rivaled the most visceral violence to be seen on screen or in horror comics (Figure 12).³²

³² For American propaganda see John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986); for film, see Doherty, *Projections of War*. Tuttle makes the closer connection



Figure 12

Ad for the 5th War Bond from the *Lexington Clipper* (June 22, 1944).

Horror films gradually appeared on Lexington screens, with equally provocative and vibrant advertising. By 1945 taste for those movies as well as romances, musicals, dramas, and

between mass entertainment and the imaginative lives of children throughout “*Daddy’s Gone to War*,” especially in chapter 9.

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westerns overthrew the war movie.³³ Jimmy trained his imagination with all of it.³⁴ Media portraits of the war as virtuous self-defense made mayhem legitimate in ways adolescents would have noticed.³⁵ Jimmy imitated the comic conventions best suited to tell and “see” what he imagined: explosions, aerial dogfights, fights with various instruments, strangulations, maiming, and decapitation. In this context Jimmy’s comic strip violence and anarchistic dark humor are not surprising.

Consistent with newspaper coverage elsewhere, the *Lexington Clipper* reported the Pacific war with Japan more than the European theater.³⁶ Jimmy’s comics followed the basic story line of the war’s origins. What fear and excitement haunted American children from a Japanese air attack?³⁷ He imagined a surprise air raid on a small town. Peaceful civilians are unjustly bombed and strafed by pilots of a cruel expansionist regime (Figures 13, 14).³⁸ Violating a Sunday, the Toad air force even targets women and children.

³³ Readership in superhero and war comics declined at about the same time; Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 56-60, and Savage, *Commies, Cowboys and Jungle Queens*, 12-13.

³⁴ Brian Sutton-Smith describes the “solitude” of the modern child at play in *Toys as Culture* (New York: Gardner Press, 1986), 24-5.

³⁵ Amato, *Rethinking Home*, 91-2, describes domestic anger in rural America and media representations as a legitimate outlet of violence. For the anarchistic quality of animated cartoons, see Cross, *Kids’ Stuff*, 105.

³⁶ Tuttle, “Daddy’s Gone to War,” 138.

³⁷ Children reported daydreams and nightmares of Japanese or German tanks and planes attacking their towns; see Tuttle, “Daddy’s Gone to War,” 5-12. Such fears were common among residents of Midwestern towns; see R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains during World War II* (Lincoln: NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 28, 31, 88-91.

³⁸ On this stereotype promoted in both American and Japanese propaganda, see Dower, *War without Mercy*.

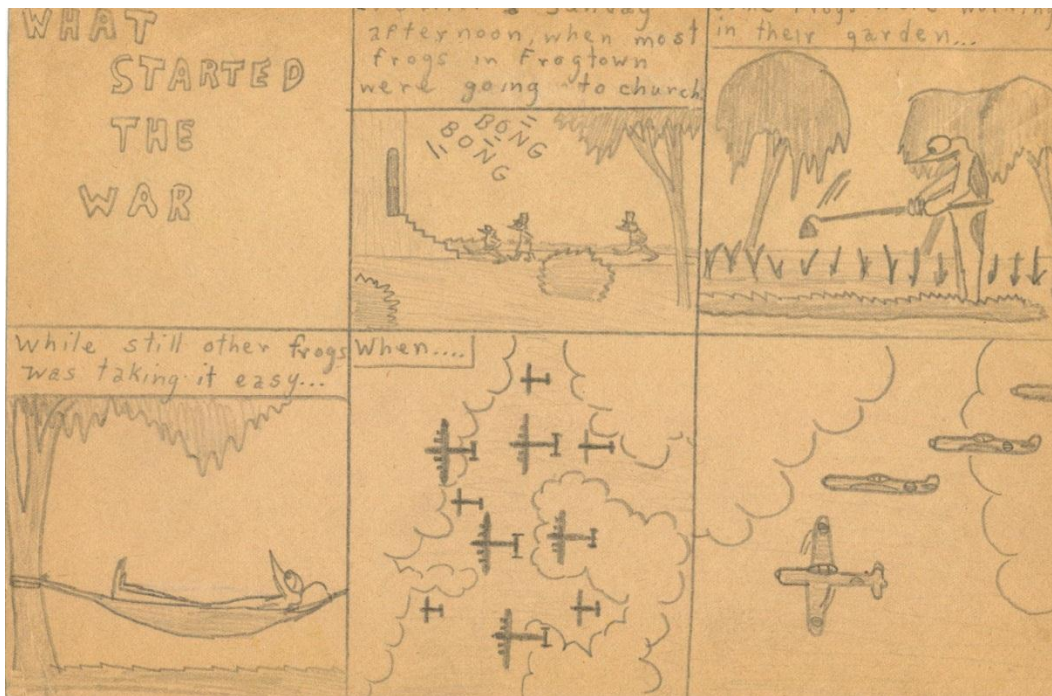


Figure 13
From “The Famous War of the Frogs and Toads.”

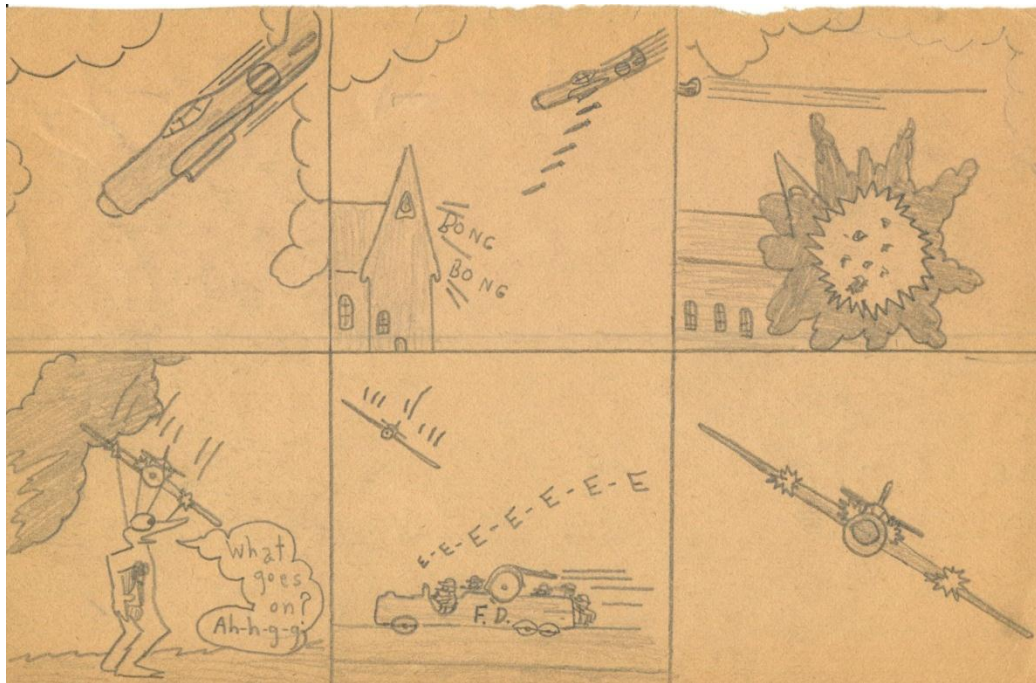


Figure 14
From “The Famous War of the Frogs and the Toads.”

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Jimmy is not too far from the standard of comic and illustrated depictions of the Japanese and Germans in his local papers, where ads for films, bond sales and editorial cartoons trafficked in typical stereotypes.³⁹ Jimmy added maps to the war comics to help orient the reader with a factual, official air echoing those in Milton Caniff’s *Terry and the Pirates* and the local papers as well as film serials.⁴⁰ Far uglier were the portraits of Japanese in comic books like *Airboy* and *Captain Midnight*. *Air Fighters Comics*, beginning in 1941, was dominated by Japanese characters with prominent teeth, speaking Pidgin English, and the slanted eyes of a rodent. The Japanese soldier was simian, and his leaders were monstrous, armed with long knobbed clawed hands, fanged teeth, and even scales. They kill without remorse; they happily betray the “white men” whose race they hate; they torture with sadistic joy.⁴¹ Are Jimmy’s comics racist? Elsewhere he drew evil Frogs and later winged Frogs in the same manner as the Toads. The characterization of the eyes and teeth, their cruelty and viciousness marked malevolence, not distinctions of a racial nature.⁴² Still, Toad behavior generally echoed common media portraits of the Japanese.

Jimmy explained nothing of why the Toad military attacked; such treacherous cruelty is simply their nature. We never see the Toads in their native land; no Toad families or scenes of

³⁹Flogging and torture stood out in *Hitler’s Children* (1942) and *Behind the Rising Sun* (1943); Doherty, *Projections of War*, 53-4. *The Purple Heart* (1944) was the first American film to depict the Japanese torture of POWs; *ibid*, 50-1. Dower discusses stereotypes of Japanese and German torture in American propaganda in *War without Mercy*, chapter 3, especially 46-52, and 129.

⁴⁰Milton Caniff, *The Complete Terry and the Pirates 1943-1944*, v. 5, ed. Dean Mullaney (San Diego: IDW Publishing, 2008).

⁴¹ See “The Bald Eagle” in *Air Fighters Comics*, Hillman Productions #2 (November 1942); “Airboy,” *Air Fighters Comics*, #9 (June 1943). An earlier episode of “Sky Wolf,” *Air Fighters Comics* #2 (November 1942) tells of “Goro, the Tokyo Torturer,” a huge Japanese hulk with drooling fangs. His favorite is a chopper that takes three hours to saw off a man’s head, which Hitler is excited to watch. For those stereotypes generally in comics, see Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 45-7.

⁴² For racist images in toys and children’s goods in this period, see Cross, *Kid’s Stuff*, 97-8.

leisure occur. That isn’t important; it only matters that they are cunning, brutal opponents. Their teeth and eyes capture all the viewer needs to know of their intentions (Figure 15).

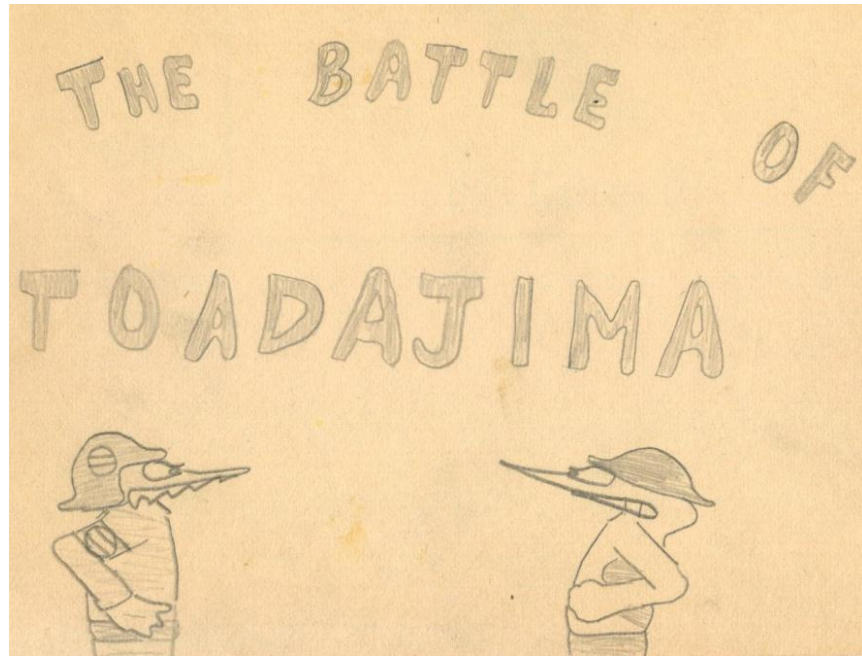


Figure 15

The innocent, hard-working Frogs respond with courage and dedication. Rebuilding their destroyed town, they arm and train for the war. Of the five sections of the “War” only one—“The Fate of a Toad Convoy”—ends with a Frog victory. The others recount brave but greatly outnumbered Frogs fighting the enemy for their lives and honor. He drew extended aerial duels between Frog and Toad pilots, replicating similar images in air combat films of the time as well as comic books like *Air Fighters Comics* and *Captain Midnight* (Figure 16).

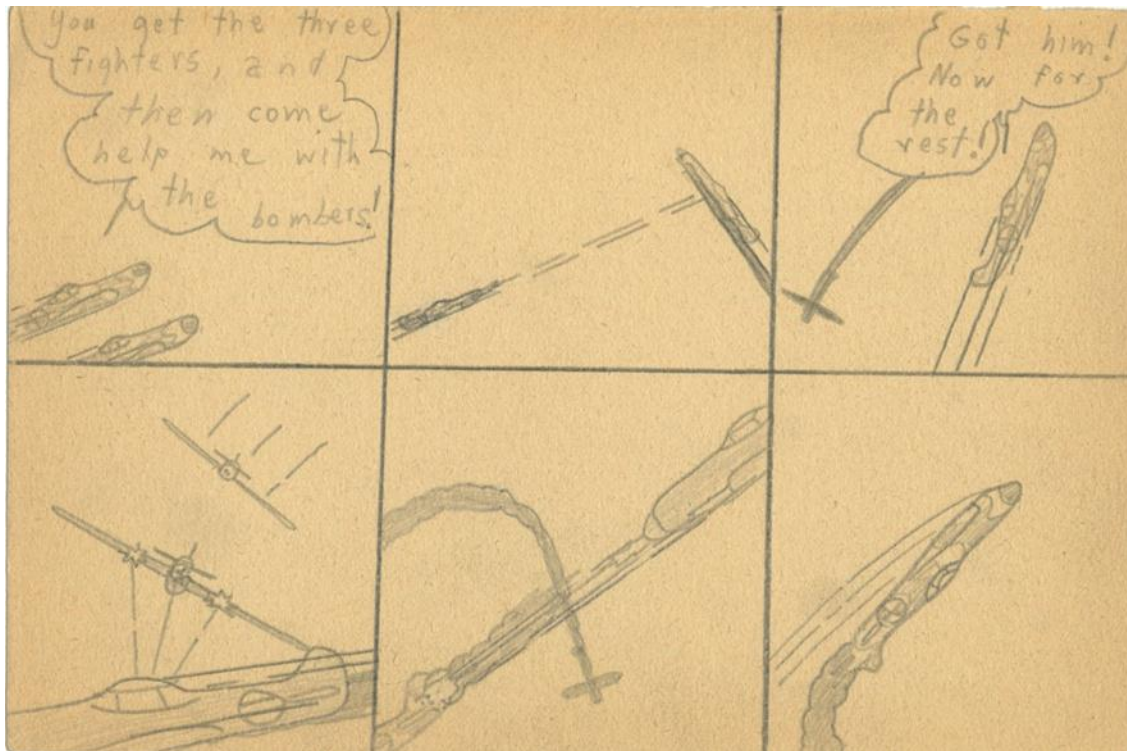


Figure 16
From “The Fall of Eagle Island.”

In one portion of “The Fall of Eagle Island,” Jimmy depicts a Frog pilot parachuting from his burning fighter, only to be cruelly strafed by a Toad pilot (Figures 17, 18).

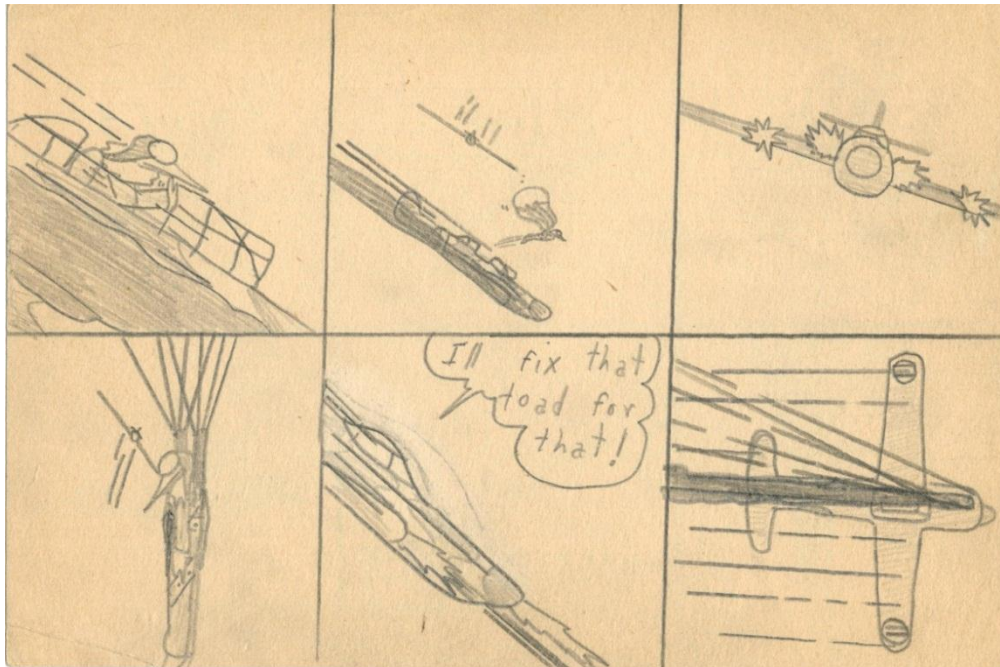


Figure 17
From "The Fall of Eagle Island."

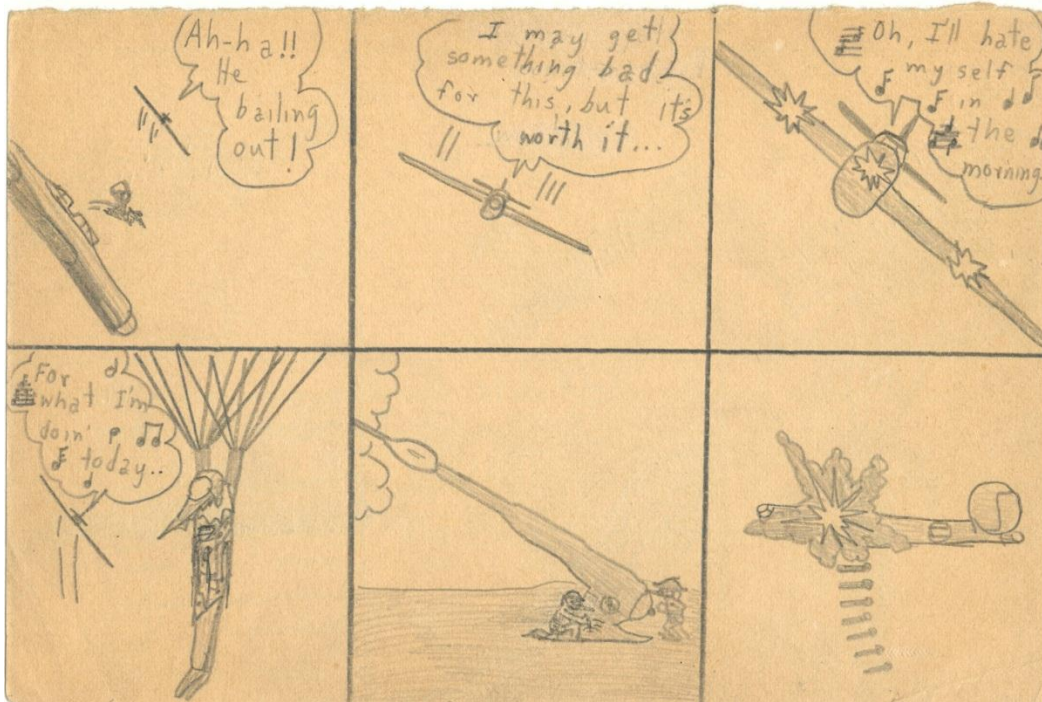


Figure 18
From "The Fall of Eagle Island."

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The Frog pilot avenges his murdered comrade and covers the act with black humor.⁴³ In “The Battle of Toadajima” and “The Fall of Eagle Island,” lone Frog airmen or soldiers hold off entire Toad platoons, but when overwhelmed, they die bravely (Figure 19).

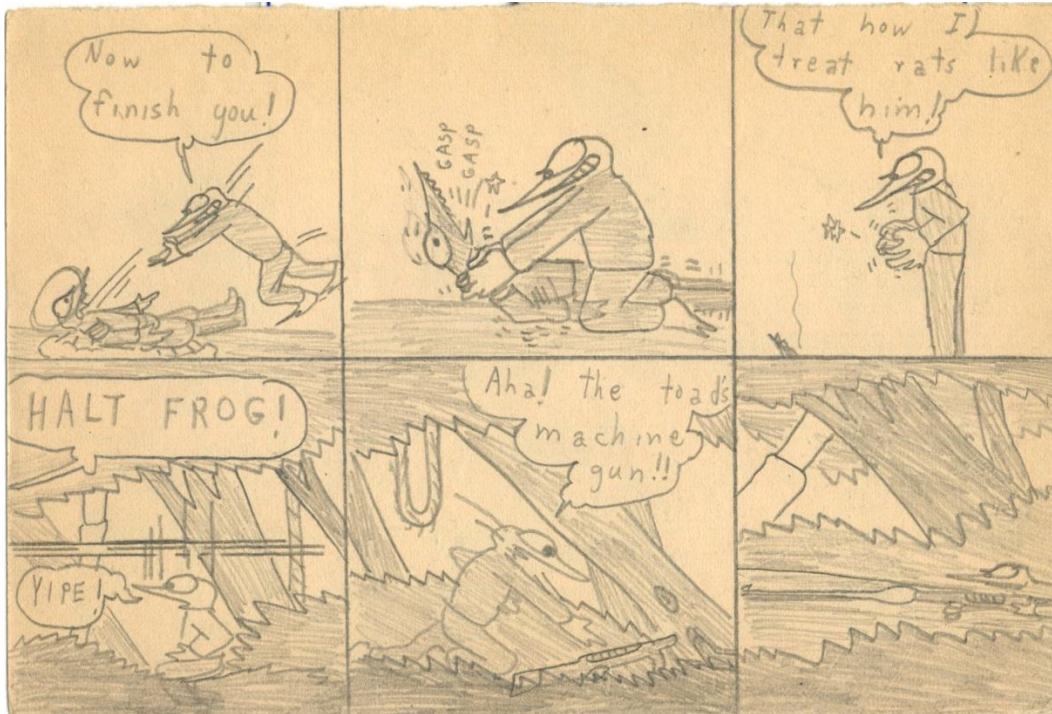


Figure 19
From “The Battle of Toadajima.”

In the war comics Jimmy consistently highlighted the virtues of the courageous Frogs fighting to defend their country and themselves against the relentless brute force of the massed Toad war machine.⁴⁴ Decent, brave individual soldiers fought for the best of causes against an

⁴³ This recreates a pivotal scene from the earliest aerial combat film, *Flying Tigers* (1942), shown at the Majestic in November 1942; *Clipper*, November 12, 1942. It also occurred in the films *Wake Island* (1942) and *Air Force* (1943), but they were not advertised in the *Clipper* or the *Herald*.

⁴⁴ The seminal combat film *Bataan* (1943), where a platoon courageously fights superior numbers of cruel Japanese soldiers until the last, played at the Majestic in September 1943; *Clipper*, September 30, 1943. For the character of such films and their context, see Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003)34, 58-63.

undifferentiated modern militaristic enemy eager to bring destruction, chaos, and suffering.

Later, when Jimmy turned to the horror/noir subject of his “The Mystery of the Winged Frogs,” he invented new invaders, flying monstrous criminals, as the sources of mayhem.

Conclusion

Literary historian and veteran military pilot Samuel Hynes argued that the “battlefield gothic” of war memoirs connected that story’s eerie terror to war’s peculiar violence.⁴⁵ In the comic strips first inspired by the war and his later horror-noir strips, Jimmy tried to create images conjuring some part of the bizarre, fascinating, and awful spectacle of mass violence. The anarchic tone of the comics is consistent with one young man’s possible response to small town authority and during the war the authorized violence of the state. As progressive educators in the 1930s worked harder to regulate the minds and bodies of their students, the media during the war depicted the close co-operation of government and popular culture to present a unified war effort to the public. The comics were Jimmy’s rebellious reply.⁴⁶

Redrafting adventures onto Lexington’s scale, Jimmy turned the local into something strange. Though he set most of his war stories in far-away ocean battlefields and jungles, the settings for the Toad invasion represent the neighborhoods, homes, and buildings familiar to him.⁴⁷ If Jimmy read *Dick Tracy* and other comics and saw a range of films, he would have had plenty of cityscapes to imitate. Yet the “Frogtown” attacked by the Toads has churches, homes, and libraries of the same scale as similar buildings from his childhood Lexington, most still there

⁴⁵ *The Soldier’s Tale: Bearing Witness to a Modern War* (New York: Viking, 1997), 19.

⁴⁶ Lindenmeyer, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up*, 119-120; Tuttle, “*Daddy’s Gone to War*,” chapter 7, particularly 127, 132-3.

⁴⁷ Michael Lesy discovered terror and madness beneath the surface of rural American life, while the city was a utopia of licensed adolescent escape; see *Wisconsin Death Trip* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973, 1991).

today. What IF a nation of monstrous militarized and mechanized killers attacked Lexington?

What IF winged monstrous frogs robbed and assaulted citizens late at night?⁴⁸

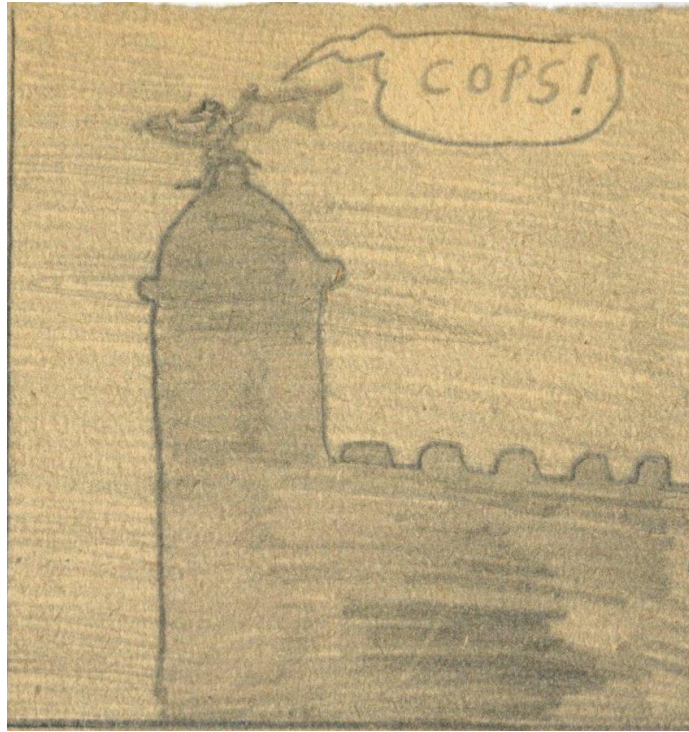


Figure 20
Detail from “The Mystery of the Winged Frogs”

⁴⁸ For re-working the experience of the city at the “street” level, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), especially chapter 7.

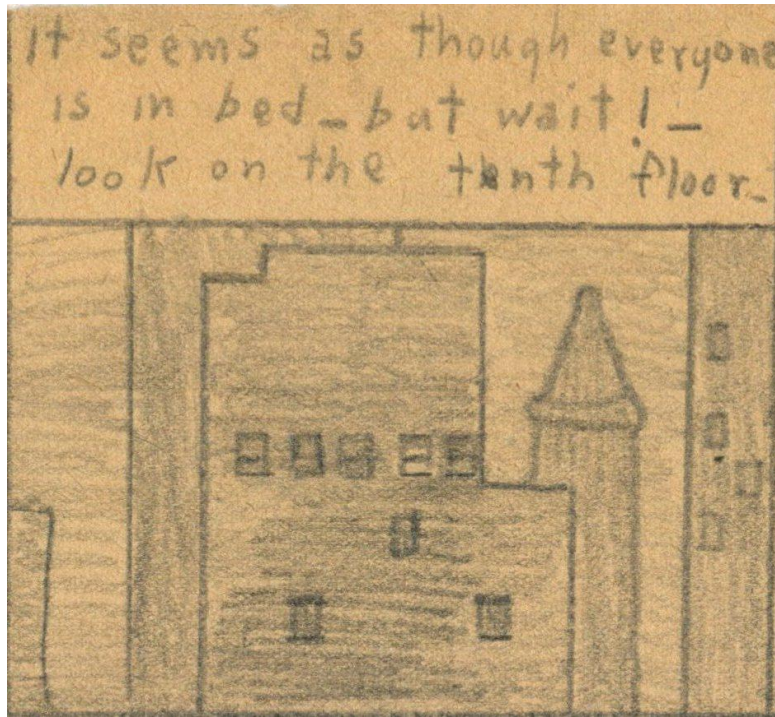


Figure 21

Detail from an untitled, unfinished story.



Figure 22

The Cornland Hotel (razed in 1963). Image from the Dawson County Historical Society.

The war stories required travel beyond the safe and familiar to the unpredictable and threatening. Jimmy’s imagination moved into the excitement and power of creating, sustaining, and drafting images of challenge and even terror. Horror, after all—intentionally depicting monstrous evil, satisfying a fascination with it in order to provoke dread, basic disgust, or shock—typically occurs in the everyday.⁴⁹ Doing so, he may have gained a sense of joining the anarchism of comic artists while in an adult world in which he had little real authority.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ For this definition see Philip J. Nickel, “Horror and the Idea of Everyday Life: On Skeptical Threats in *Psycho* and *The Birds*”, in Thomas Fahy, ed., *The Philosophy of Horror* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2012), 14-15. For “art horror” and danger, dread and disgust, see Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), chapter 1.

⁵⁰ Olav Christensen’s study of Norwegian snowboarders describes them imitating tricks they see in documentaries and magazines. The snowboarding world of great riders raises the ceiling of possibility and becomes their world, the world in which they imagine themselves as full members; “Board With the World’: Youthful Approaches to

Building his own world from those images, Jimmy took creative control of the events of massive, modern dynamic machine warfare, capable of destruction both terrifying and exciting. He joined the world of cartoonists and story tellers where he had the power to manipulate images of what he wanted to see. Jimmy’s cartoon violence contributes to the violation of the adult world of values and moralism found in comics and comic strips in the late 1930s through the 1940s.⁵¹ The jungle was utterly unlike the Midwest Plains: ancient, labyrinthine, and darkly deadly, a rich iconic landscape so unlike Nebraska and yet probably just as confusing, at times lonely and even frightening in its own way.⁵² While the war comics portray the justice of the Frogs responding to the Toad attack, they rarely have a moralistic tone. Jimmy cared about exciting aesthetics of dynamic fighting on land and in the air. He cared about one-off dark gags where senseless violence shocks us to laughter, or about the varieties of brutal violence in melee style (Figures 23, 24).

Landscapes and Mediascapes,” in *Designing Modern Childhoods*, ed. Marta Gutman and Ning de Coninck-Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 282-300.

⁵¹ For comics as fundamentally anarchistic and outrageous, see Bradford W. Wright, “Comic books,” in *The Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, ed. Thomas Riggs, 2nd ed., vol. 1, (Detroit: St. James Press, 2000), 560. On the decline by domestication of superhero comic book violence after the war, see Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 57-60.

⁵² This is the suggestion of Lesy, *Wisconsin Death Trip*, and Amato, *Rethinking Home*, chapter 6.

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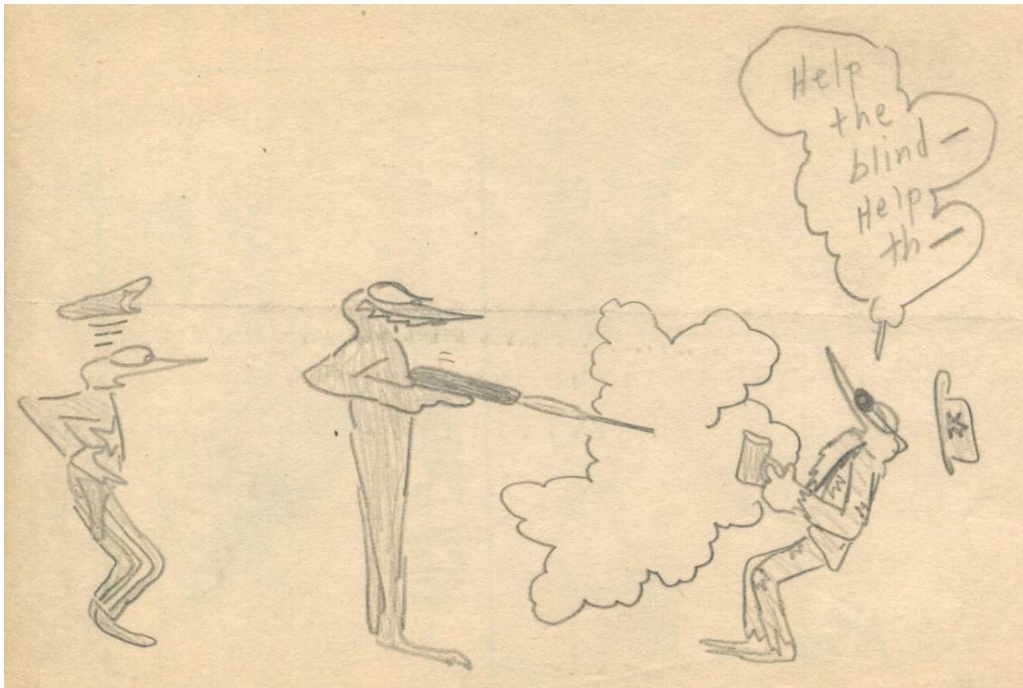


Figure 23

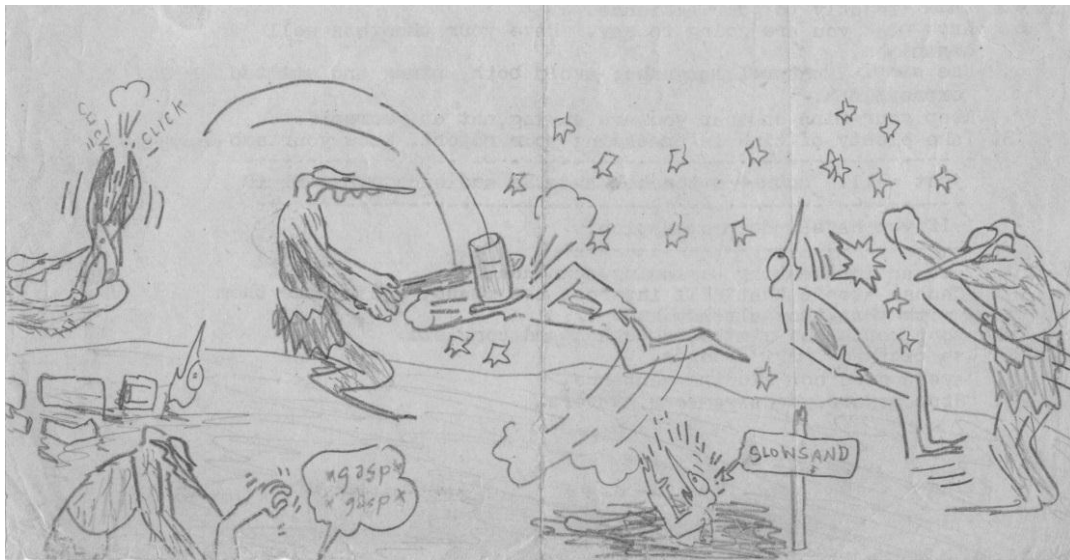


Figure 24

More than the anxiety and privation of the Depression, the media portrait of World War II gave Jimmy authoritative permission to revel in mayhem, brutality, and spectacular destruction.

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comics with murderous frogs with bat wings.⁵³ Moving to the violence of the city and the monstrous, Jimmy paralleled how comic book taste was itself moving from war to crime and horror stories. In the mélange of popular culture Jimmy’s work might illustrate how the violence of pre-war and wartime comic art created a taste for the kinds of violence developed in the horror and crime comics popular within a few years of the end of the war.⁵⁴ The comics tell how a young Nebraska boy's creative zeal distilled typical rebellion, loneliness, and fascination with the macabre into something dynamic and strange. With these comics he achieved the dream of a young storytelling artisan inspired to reinvent his own world.

⁵³ On the unnaturalness of “art horror” erupting from the taken-for-granted world, see Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*.

⁵⁴ On the transition to comic book horror in the late 1940s and early 1950s, see Hajdu, *The Ten Cent Plague*, chapters 3, 4; Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, chapters 3, 4. Basinger has commented on the relationships between horror film motifs and those of a combat film like *Bataan*; see *The World War II Combat Film*, 61, 138-9.