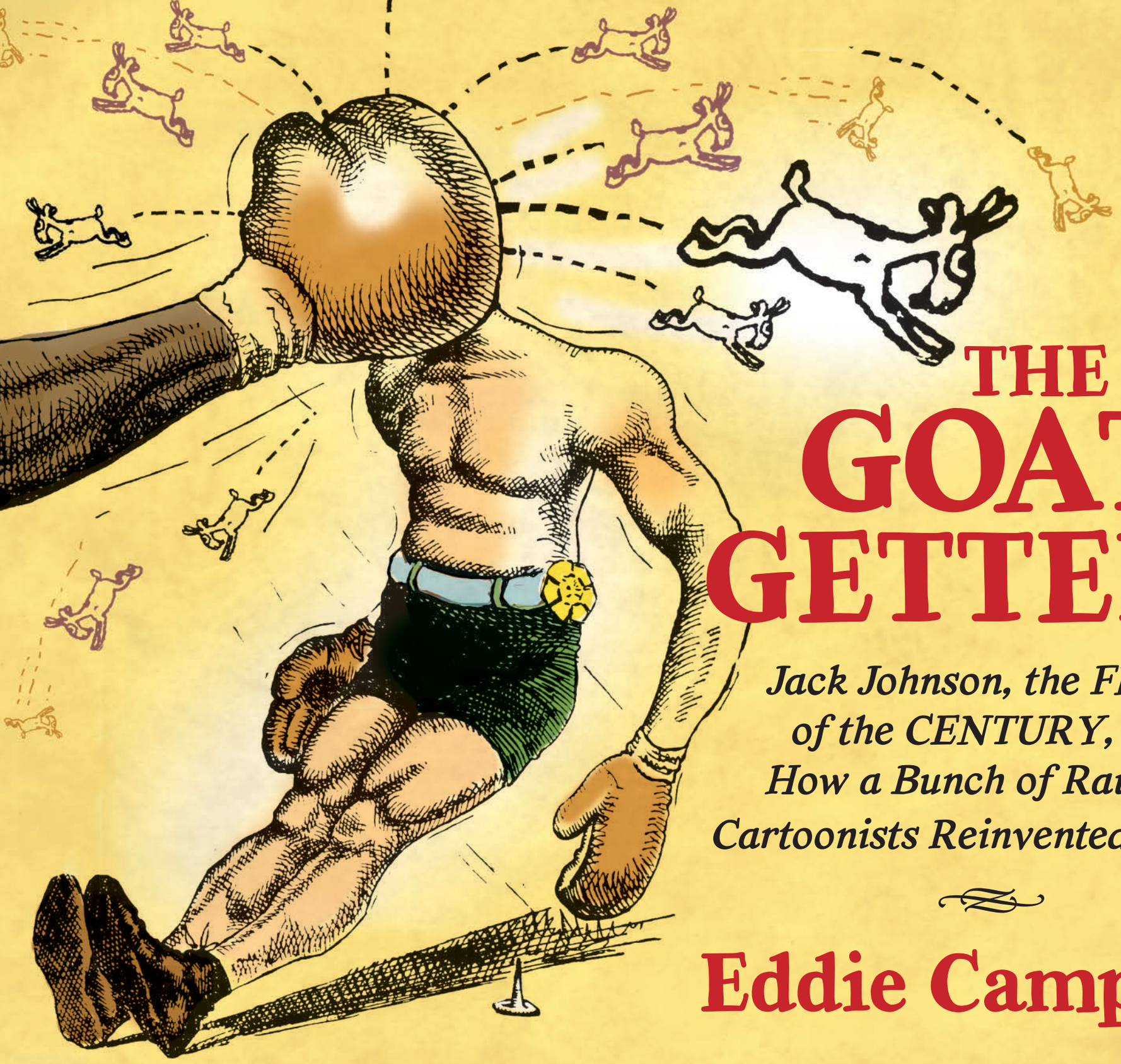

THE GOAT GETTERS

Jack Johnson, the FIGHT of the CENTURY, and How a Bunch of Raucous Cartoonists Reinvented Comics

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PICTURES

A goodly number of the pictures in this book are reproduced from paper copies in the Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum, San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, as noted in their individual captions.

Front cover is made up of: figure and arm by Robert Carter, from an uncolored cartoon, Chicago *Tribune* March 17, 1897, goats by Bud Fisher. Back cover: Tom Powers, Chicago *Examiner,* (from New York *American*) December 8, 1912. (This kind of cartoon never appeared in color but is colorized by me here for the purpose of fixing Jimmy Swinnerton's yellow suit in the reader's head, though Powers is probably no authority on the cut).

1 George Herriman (page 1), baseball, LA *Examiner*, October 10, 1908. Chicago won the World Series. (Billy Ireland Cartoon Library)

2 Robert Edgren (page 2), anticipating boxing bout between Jim Jeffries and Jack Monroe, New York *Evening Journal*, August 29, 1903.

3 goats (title page), clockwise from one o'clock: Tad Dorgan, George Herriman, Tad Dorgan, Charles Bell, Bud Fisher, Robert Carter.

4 Rube Goldberg (this page, above), "Willard is now a giant," Philadelphia *Inquirer* (from NY *Evening News*), March 20, 1916. At right, some parties at the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* spent much of 1909 getting Ty Cobb's goat. Carlisle Martin, story/interview under a cartoon by himself, May 9, 1909.

Well, I dished that stuff up to Ty and his warm, balmy, Southern heart weakened under the strain. "Don't take it so hard, little one," he chirped. "Let's sit down and talk it over."

"What relation does the catcher hold to the base runner and what relation does either bear to the goat?" was the first one I put over.

His violet eyes turned to a gunmetal gray and the fighting lines of his mouth and jaws sagged all out of plumb. In 12¾ seconds he was a changed man.

"Are you speaking of a particular base runner and a particular goat and a particular catcher?" he asked. giving me the frapped peep.

WITH a nonchalant toss of the head I came right back at him. "Yes, Tyrus Raymond, you mutter correctly. It was I, yes, me, who got you in bad on that goat story and now I'm here to present your side of the justly celebrated Angora romance, Criger versus Cobb, to the American people.

"Be that as it may, I never knock a ballplayer," said Tyrus, munching savagely on his perfecto. "Yes, he's a good catcher, but I don't believe he's playing the game he put up last

INTRODUCTION

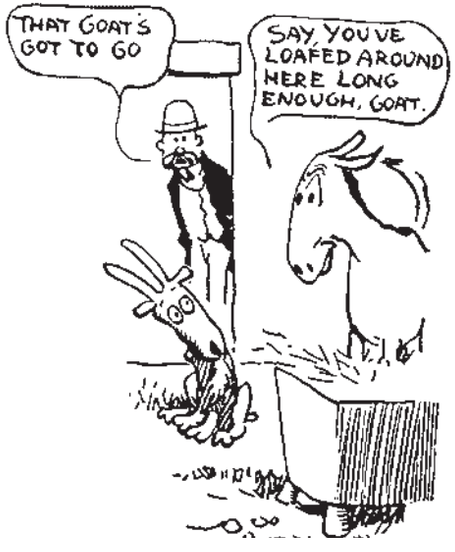
To get a person's goat, meaning to aggravate and upset them, originated in the custom of keeping a goat in a racehorse's stable to calm the horse. Whether at home or brought along to the racetrack by the owner, the two would be stabled together overnight. You can still find the practice today, as shown by this excerpt from a recent lightweight news item, "GOAT HELPS SOOTHE KENTUCKY DERBY HORSE– *An owner gave us a horse, and they told us to go pick it up at another trainer's stable, and we went and picked it up, and they said, 'Oh, by the way, it comes with this baby goat.*'" The idea, conceived by an unscrupulous individual, was to "get the horse's goat," meaning to steal the little animal and thus unsettle the horse in order to gain a betting advantage in the next day's race. The coining of this phrase, one among many, came out of early sports-page cartooning, where it played out as a fad for a year or two before entering everyday speech.

Another thing that largely came out of sports page cartooning was the six-days-a-week comic strip. So many of the great characters and series started out on the sports page. I'm talking about *Barney Google* of course, and *Ripley's Believe it or Not!*, but also *Krazy Kat*.

A humorous strain of slang and a vital component of the celebrated art of comics both came from sports cartooning. But the sports cartoon has slipped from the popular memory and we do not know very much about it. It was a unique thing, not just a drawn squib on a sporting subject, but a form of cartoon that could convey other subjects. In its classic mode, it mashed up the serious, the humorous and the photographic in a unique way. But how did it get like that? The present reader may not be able to picture what I mean, for it's an art of long ago, like Sunday color funnies that filled a whole big page each, and so many of those old silent movie comedies that are so much funnier than you imagine they could still be.

And where did the early comic book artists get their concept of dynamic anatomy? That didn't come out of regular literary illustration, or even the pulp magazines, for all that some have said that it did. It came from sports cartooning. (For further confirmation look at the tussling boxers on the previous spread and think of the blocky fighting figures of Jack Kirby in the mid-1960s, or flip to the astonishing piece of action on page 104, or the Man vs. Gorilla on page 125.)

To give a sense of the continuity of the period I have focused largely on one sport, the story of the early World Heavyweight Boxing Championship. With careful selection and the right commentary, it makes a good story. It is full of social drama and thumps.



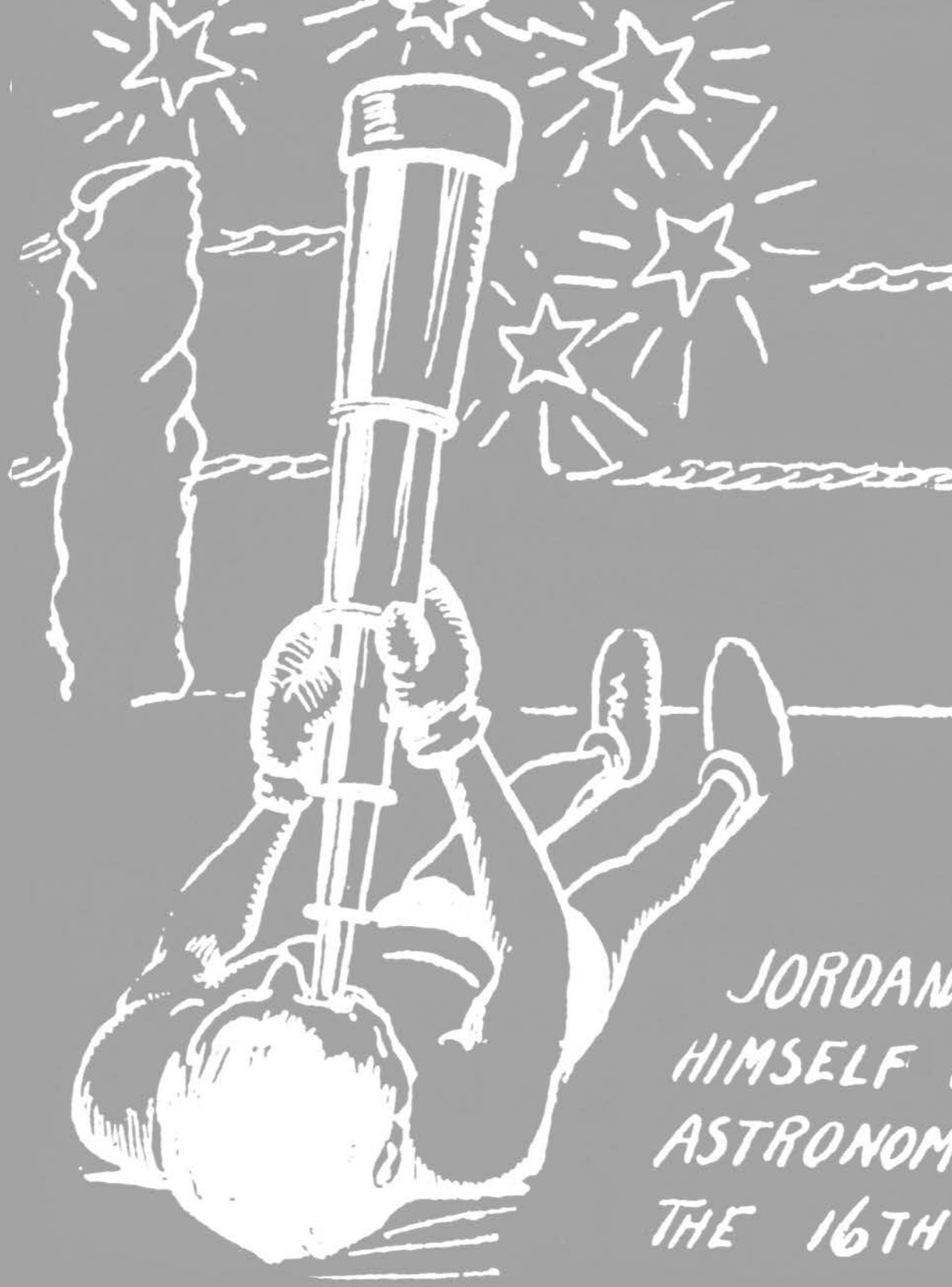
7 George Herriman, vignette from a story cartoon about an ice company getting rid of a misbehaving goat. Relevant to our thesis is that the text story does not trouble to explain why an ice company would keep one. Los Angeles *Examiner,* January 26, 1909.

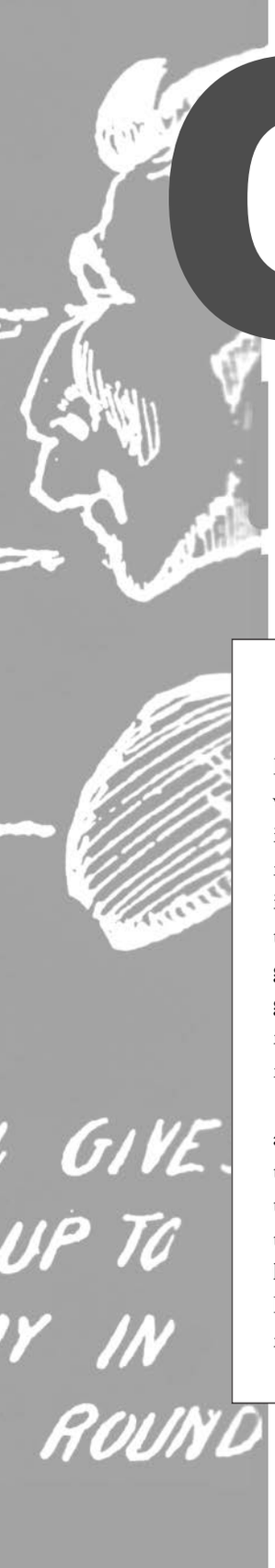
New York is a swell dump, but Frisco was the bear. If a fellow takes a spill in Frisco chasing a car and drops his quarter, they pick him up, ask him if he needs a doctor or a lawyer, then hand him his quarter, dust him off and start him off again. Let the same man take a brodie in New York under the same circumstances. Everyone would dive for the quarter and—let George pick him up. Just a slight difference.

It's an awful goat-getter, John, to sit back with the boys and talk about the old town. Here we are with red beaks, big overcoats, thick arctic shoes, muffler and mittens, while you fellows sit out on the porch at night and sniff the ozone that breezes over the old Twin Peaks.

But then we all started these different jobs of ours out here...

8 Tad Dorgan (left), detail from a cartoon, 1912. Text above is also by Tad, from a letter, same year.
9 artist not identified, (large image) featherweight Eddie Santry knocks out Ben Jordan on October 10, 1899, probably New York *Journal*.





CHAPTER ONE

OF THE 1,500,000,000 HUMAN BEINGS HE COULD THRASH ANY ONE

HOW I CAME TO IT

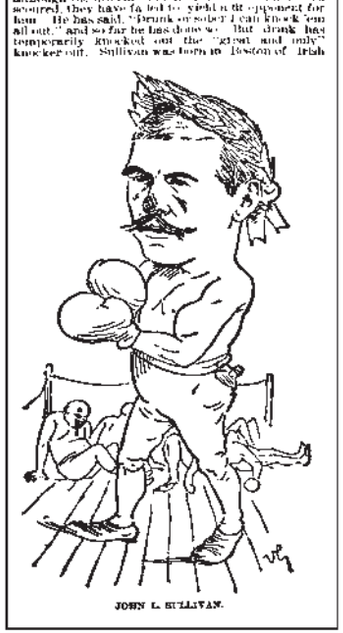
ENGLAND, 1980. Thirty-eight years ago, I was working in a small factory, cutting sheet metal into rectangles. This unchallenging work suited me, as it freed my brain to roam the universe of information, making connections between one thing and another, without anything practical getting in the way. While my contemporaries were going to college and getting degrees, I imagined myself a philosopher, in my oily apron, with my noodle in the cumulus.

Parked next to my mechanical guillotine was a rough bookstand I had made, just a weird bent thing really, as my competence did not stretch to actually working the metal. Upon this bent thing, while I was doing the endlessly repetitive labor, I read books about every thinkable subject. I read them all, whether they interested me or not, out of a random and daft curiosity. And so, between the origins of money and a study of the obscene sculptural decoration on the exteriors of Romanesque churches, between the rudiments of logic and a discography of 1920s London dance orchestras, I read a pictorial history of the sport of boxing.[1]

The early pages of this book were illustrated with old heavy-handed same-looking prints of solid anatomies facing off against each other, with fists raised and feet splayed just exactly so. The later pages showed all the great photos of the ring from the twentieth century. But right there in the hinges were a couple of cartoony pen drawings reproduced from old newspapers. One was signed "Tad," a name I had come across, and the other was unsigned, in a style that I have come, correctly or not, to characterize as "San Francisco style."

The loosely hand-lettered caption read: "Jordan gives himself up to astronomy in the 16th round." And the picture showed the boxer lying on his back on that square of roped-off canvas, looking up through an incongruous telescope. Everything else in this book of boxing history was literal except for this insouciant little drawing of a guy, on his back, seeing stars. It wasn't even a particularly complicated or original joke, as every possible variation was already being wrung out of the "seeing stars" gag, though I didn't know it at the time. Every joke is a variation on some other joke after all. I resolved there and then to one day find out where it came from, this little sketch, and how on earth it came about that facetious doodles should be the documents of authority in the history of anything.

This kind of cartoon may turn up occasionally as memorabilia, or as an illustration of a famous ballgame or prizefight when a photo is lacking, but with little attention given to the pen and ink artist who drew it. It can be a useful record, in particular, of the early days of the Queensberry Rules era of boxing. The essential differentiating principle of this era was the replacement of bare knuckles with gloves. The first world champion of boxing under the Queensberry Rules was the subject of my chapter title above– John L. Sullivan could thrash 'em all, and was ready to do it at the drop of the first hat. He was a cartoon character before anyone got a pencil out.


JOHN L. SULLIVAN.

10 Valerian Gribayedoff draws John L. Sullivan (left), and Jack Dempsey (below), among the thirteen caricatures of "Famous Fighters." New York *World,* Sunday, August 3, 1884.

Passing references to this kind of cartooning also turn up in the published histories of comics. Coulton Waugh, writing one of the first of these in 1947, acknowledged the precedence of the sports page:

> *The established convention of these racetrack and baseball artists was to spot their sport material around in a free and easy way, and then, for fun, add a few boxes with comic characters. This was the start of many of the famous daily strips; the little, funny characters would catch on, dominate the scene, and the sports cartoonist would find himself a comic artist, with a set of characters, and a following of fans.*[2]

The historians of the comics have never gone deeper than that. It all remains in a mist back there at the beginning. Nobody has shown that the sports page of the newspapers was the venue for some of the most inventive and exciting cartooning of its time, a large amount of it not even related to actual sporting activity. It is worthy of attention as a unique event with its own artists, devices, characters and history. In addition to being an artistic event in its own right, it is also something of a missing link, standing as an important stage in the evolution of the medium of comics.

The genre originated in San Francisco. Its leading practitioners either came from or first made their mark on the West Coast of the USA. They invented and shared a lively variety of methods and stylistic peculiarities, including graphic tricks and a lexicon of colorful slang. Then they brought it all east to New York.

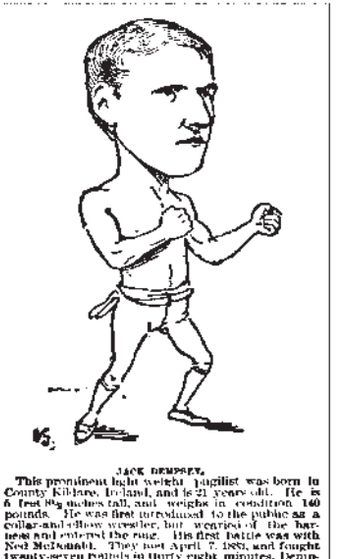
I am told that one no longer uses the vulgar "Frisco" for the city's name and I can only think it must be for all the wrong reasons. You will find me using it in the way that most of the artists I am writing about used it, with a reflection of their civic pride. We can hardly expect them to stand on ceremony since they were bending the language out of shape in every other respect

> *There was an easygoing, hatonthebackofthehead, footonthedesk feeling about the sports artists, and the language of Mr. Mutt is ripe and low-down, from the start. The first strips abound in such expressions as "fall guy" "tumbling to himself," "good thing," "piker," "got his goat," all quite new in 1907. (Waugh)*

Right at the start here, for the casual reader who might feel that the subject is outside their normal area of curiosity, let me clarify that I myself have only a passing interest in boxing or other sports. I have never bet on a horse and I wince at the sight of blood. Furthermore, I am not familiar with San Francisco beyond a few short visits. My subject is the story of a popular art, and all the peculiar ways by which it got the way it got. I write as a person who has made his living from writing and drawing and accumulating cartoon art for over forty years. What drives me is a fellow feeling for those artists putting in their day's work over a century ago. They unselfconsciously capture a great deal of the ordinary working life around them, and for me the looseness of their lines gives it a freshness, as though it were happening last night.

Of the characters in this story, some are real, some are too daft to be real. The personalities of the likes of Tad and Rube Goldberg are all in their work, and whether what they have to say about Jack Johnson or Jeff or Fitz or Wee Willie Hearst or Tex Rickard or Silk Hat Harry is true or balonious, by the time you are finished you will no longer mind much as to the difference. Alas, there will be occasions of political incorrectness. For the sake of an accurate picture, they stand uncorrected. Most of us would not much like the world of 1900. We would find its racism reprehensible and its sexism indefensible. Hell, we wouldn't even put up with the smoke.

The "missing link" of comics is what I suggested above, and you may be wondering why this evolutionary model is in need of a copula. It has been well enough documented that the daily comic strip, the six-days-per-week black and white sequence of images running across the newspaper page, originated in the papers' sports sections. It's true that black and white strips had appeared already in the daily papers in a sporadic fashion, even for several weeks at a time. However, the idea of a character appearing in the same place every day, on and on indefinitely, is said to have begun with "A. Mutt Starts in to


JACK DEMPSEY.
This prominent light weight pugilist was born in County Kildare, Ireland, and is 21 years old. He is 5 feet 8½ inches tall, and weighs in condition 140 pounds. He was first introduced to the public as a collar-and-elbow wrestler, but wearied of the harness and entered the ring. His first battle was with Ned McDonald. They met April 7, 1883, and fought twenty-seven rounds in thirty-eight minutes. Demp-


ORK, SUNDAY, JANUARY 1

SENATOR MILLER.
Senator John F. Miller is another Pacific coast

Play the Races" in the San Francisco *Chronicle* of November 15, 1907. I'm not interested in arguing about "firsts," for too much ink has been wasted on that already. My purpose is to show how and why the sports page was the venue for such an invention, and, more specifically, why San Francisco was the place it had to happen.

This period has never been adequately treated in our assorted histories. It is uncharted, this ten-year gap between Jimmy Swinnerton's departure from San Francisco and Augustus Mutt's arrival there, apparently from out of nowhere. For the reader who has not heard of these people, the former was a cool dude and the latter was an incurable boob, in the 1907 meaning of the word. The question, then: what went down in that long-ago city that produced more than its share of first-rate cartoonists?

THE SOURCE MATERIALS

The problem with old newspapers is getting a look at them. There are a number of private collectors who have clipped old comics and like to see the stuff published in fine books and on the internet. The greatest of them was the late Bill Blackbeard. In establishing the enormous collection of newspaper comics at his San Francisco Academy of Comic Art, Blackbeard made a lifetime project of rescuing huge amounts of paper that were being discarded by libraries. His books of and about old comic art, beginning way back in the 1970s, inspired me to write this one. Blackbeard's collection is now housed safely at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Museum in Columbus Ohio, and contains some complete bound volumes of a few key papers. Those of the New York *American* are in a particularly good state of preservation.

The thing about collectors, however, is that they tend to be focused single-mindedly on the comic sections. This means that we rarely see the cartoons in their contexts, as a component of a page and of the whole paper. The sports pages, the women's section, the editorial and the rest, are all gone unless some other sort of collector was keeping those. It came to be taken for granted that a newspaper came in sections, but it wasn't always so. From around 1890 the American newspaper evolved from four or eight pages of grey type to a situation where a Sunday issue could hold "88 pages in eleven parts." An example of such a paper lists its sections, next to the front-page banner, for my convenience: "News, Worker's Magazine, Sporting, Special Features, Editorial, Classified, Household Hints, Colored Magazine, Drama, Colored picture, Comics." The same divisions applied all over, though the names might change. Household Hints could be called the "Women's page" and drama could be "Arts and Entertainment."

For those missing parts we can no longer see in the form of original paper, there is the secondary source, the great big wodge of microfilm in public libraries. Sixty-plus years ago the library system began systematically microfilming its newspaper archives, which sounds like a useful idea, in that it can make them more accessible and reproducible. It sounds like a good idea, that is, until you realize that they've been busting up the originals in the process, in the belief that microfilm survives better than newsprint.[3] Granted, it takes up less space. The volumes are disbound for photographing and then discarded, the loose pages often being salvaged by the kind of business that sells you a laminated flashback to your birth-date.

Microfilm has become more accessible to us through digital scanning and archiving in programs on the internet by the Library of Congress and other organizations, so that when it's all done we won't have to visit a particular city to read its old papers.[4] Now at least we can get a look at all the sections and pages, stretched, scratched and out of focus though much of it is likely to be (it's always harder to print an image from microfilm than from paper.) The usability of these systems goes some way to salving the irritation we might feel at the wholesale destruction of the paper. We think somebody else is looking after things, and by the time we realize it could have been us, it's usually too late.

The challenge when faced with all this material, in whatever muddle it has come down to us, is in finding a jungle guide. The standard biographical references are not always helpful, due to


11, 1885.

has a large place in Detroit and is building a winter residence in this city.

SENATOR SALE.
Senator Eugene Hale, of Maine, is the heir of Zachariah Chandler's great fortune. He is a very conservative senator and is one of the strong friends of a high protective tariff.

11 Valerian Gribayedoff draws "Wealthy Senators" (above and right), two of fourteen caricatures, New York *World*, January 11, 1885.