At a 1930 camp for teachers of high school English, the 400 participants from across the United States recognized one of their number as bearing a striking resemblance to Walt Wallet, the central character of the “Gasoline Alley” comic strip. One of those present, Julian M. Drachman, was so stirred by the occasion that he wrote a prospectus for American mythology arguing that comic strip characters were “real national heroes” because, unlike the president’s or Ralph Waldo Emerson’s, most Americans recognized their visage. Drachman attributed the appeal of the comic strip characters to their timelessness and “vulgar,” popular subject matter.¹

This story demonstrates that in the 1920s comic strips became part of everyday life in America. Americans incorporated the strips into their daily existence simply by reading them, as well as through the widespread licensing of characters and the use of the art form in advertising. Comic strips tied their audiences together as national communities of readers and familiarized them with the language of the art form. Comic strips gave these readers a shared visual culture. Moreover comics depicted appropriate ways of incorporating a growing number of commodities into their lives.

Although most of the pioneer comic strips had disappeared by the 1920s, a new crop of popular strips took their place. The longevity of these strips, which included “Gasoline Alley” (1918), “Winnie Winkle” (1920), and “Blondie” (1930), suggests not only that they appealed to a wide variety of readers but that, starting in the 1920s, those readers assimilated the strips into their daily routines. Furthermore in the 1920s Americans elevated some comic strip characters to the pantheon of folk heroes. For instance, newspaper editors who attempt to drop long-running features, such as “Gasoline Alley,” meet fierce opposition. When the Washington Post redesigned its comic strip pages in 1991 and dropped “Gasoline Alley,” it set up a special phone line to handle the several thousand calls it received. The level of engagement with comic strips displayed by the Post readers can be explained in part by the longevity of some strips.²

In the 1920s comic strip artists created a vision of America as a predominantly white, middle-class, consumer society. Most of the strips that adopted American society as a subject dealt with middle-class themes. Some strips, such as “Gasoline Alley,” were clearly middle class; by contrast, “Winnie Winkle” dealt with working-class aspirations to middle-class “lifestyles.” Other strips, such as “Polly and Her Pals,” “The Gumps,” “Tillie the Toiler,” and “Fritz Ritz,” all held to the middle-class image. Although strips such as “Moon Mullins” and “Barney Google” offered a risqué vision of American life, their humor derived from, and was cast as, a transgression of middle-class values. William Henry Young argues that during the 1930s comic strips focused on middle-class mores to put the Depression at a distance and to suggest that an ordered society and individuals could overcome the threat the Depression posed to stability. By and large comic strips ordered society through an ethos of consumption.³

For this study I read every “Gasoline Alley” strip from 1918 to 1960 and every “Winnie Winkle” strip from 1920 to 1961. I also read numerous other strips from the period. The most popular strip of the 1920s and the 1930s, “The Gumps,” frequently commented on appropriate means by which to acquire and use commodities, although in a more raucous style than either of the strips I discuss in detail. Compared with the content of “The Gumps,” Frank King’s focus on automobiles in “Gasoline Alley” puts the use of commodities into sharp relief. Likewise Martin Branner’s “Winnie Winkle” offers the clearest expression of an artist’s ambivalence toward the developing culture and the limited possibilities for criticism. The Chicago Tribune–New York Daily News syndicate distributed both strips, but their origins and subject matter were noticeably different. “Gasoline
Olney, an economist, has demonstrated that annual expenditures on automobiles grew from $22.53 per household in the decade 1909–18 to $80.15 per household in the decade 1919–28. Comparative expenditures on furniture, the next largest category of spending, were $21.83 and $43.90 respectively.  

The Tribune both benefited from and promoted the growth of the auto industry. "Gasoline Alley" and the automobile section were part of the Tribune's active support for the expanding automobile industry. For instance, the November 24, 1918, automobile section contained an article by George C. Diehl, chairman of the American Automobile Association Good Roads Board, who argued the need for a national highway system. Diehl contended that the construction of a highway system was a national planning priority and made sound economic sense because it would offer employment to those discharged from the army and war industries. The unstated assumption was that the automobile industry itself would continue to expand. The revenues from the growing number of advertisements for automobiles and related products probably accounted for the Tribune's support for the automobile industry. The paper tried to capture as much of this market as possible through its regular Sunday automobile section and special supplements on major automobile shows.  

In the early 1920s there was a widespread growth in the amount of automobile industry advertising, particularly in papers directed at middle-class readers. Both the New York Times and New York Herald both increased their already considerable advertising lineage for cars between 1921 and 1922. In Chicago the Tribune carried advertisements that promoted the automobile both as a plaything and as the triumph and lifeblood of American capitalism. For instance, a 1919 Standard Oil advertisement celebrated car ownership as providing "the means of satisfying one of [man's] most primitive instincts, a desire to venture forth like a true adventurer and enjoy the freedom of the country." A 1920 Continental Motors Corporation ad depicted the motorcar industry as "as much a part of America as the ground upon which we walk," a status achieved through individual stock holdings in auto firms, consumption, the application of scientific management and the techniques of mass production, and the romance of the industry's rapid development. In the early 1920s the Tribune also carried stories and advertisements about the construction of "a great hotel in the Loop for automobiles," the shortage of new Ford cars and
trucks, and the growing use of cars as transportation to and from work for Chicago's "army of toil." 27

"Gasoline Alley" was a product of, and a comment on, the growing significance of cars in American life. In its early incarnation the strip was one of several panel cartoons published together on the front page of the Tribune's "Editorial-Automobile" section every Sunday. The initial episode was typical of the humor of the first year's panels. A group of men gathered in their rear alley garages comment on the problems associated with maintaining an automobile. In this episode each has a different solution to Doc's difficulty in starting his car. The number of solutions offered and the conviction behind the advice imply either that automobiles are troublesome machines prone to multiple failures or that none of the men truly knows what the problem with Doc's car is so they offer bloated and false certitudes. Both interpretations of the joke suggest that the maintenance of a car requires a qualified, or at least a knowledgeable, mechanic. The didacticism of this message, leavened as it was by humor, fit the strip's location in the automobile section, which provided consumer tips for motorists. For instance, car owners looking for better advice than that offered Doc could turn to the "Motordom" column in the same issue, which contained advice on cold weather engine efficiency. 8

"Gasoline Alley" outgrew its Sunday panel format and became a daily comic strip in August 1919. 9 By this stage King had begun to develop a cast of characters, which included the couples Avery and Emily, Bill and Amy, and the bachelor Walt, in addition to Doc and his wife, Hazel. In the daily panels these characters flourished, and King constructed the strip's humor around their "personalities." The occupants of "Gasoline Alley" were middle class, and their creator conveyed this status in the commodities they purchased. In the early 1920s King depicted the characters as members of the upper echelons of the middle class. For instance, with the exception of Doc, who was indeed a medical doctor, none of the characters seemed to hold a job or engage in any occupation. A number had servants, and Walt Wallet advertised for a chauffeur in late 1920. The clearest symbol of the characters' social position was that they all owned cars.

Not only were automobiles the initial subject of the strip but they often provided the language through which the characters understood the world. In the November 16, 1920, episode Walt and Bill, on a downtown shopping trip, discuss the need for a set of sidewalk traffic regulations. Bill couches his regulations in terms of those governing the use of automobiles, thereby equating the laws governing the use of cars with desirable conduct on a shopping trip. On February 18, 1921, Doc examined Skeezix, a baby boy left on Walt's doorstep. King surely meant Walt's description of the baby as "that new acquisition of mine" and as possessing a "chassis and universal joints" to be humorous, but it transformed the terms of consumption, and the elements of a particular commodity, into an appropriate language to describe human life. King also showed Walt engaged in animistic conversations in which Walt told his old car that, just as an old horse would, it shed, growled, and had bad teeth. 10

King was not alone in developing a metaphorical language about consumption and commodities. Throughout the 1920s the Chicago Tribune carried Christmas season advertisements for the Marshall Field department store that celebrated the "Cathedral of All Stores," comparing shopping at the store to having a religious experience. The Tribune also sang its own praises as a purveyor of a society whose sumptuous commodities surpassed those depicted in the Arabian Nights tales. McCall's magazine attempted to personalize its million and a half readers as the "residents of McCall Street" to sell that audience to national advertisers. As did King, these advertisements utilized customary forms of language and experience to represent the mass consumption of commodities. But King also reversed the convention and showed a commodity shaping the ways people thought and spoke. 11

The depiction in "Gasoline Alley" of a relationship between the ownership of automobiles and social position, and the strip's demonstration of the way that commodity shapes language, conveyed an image of life as a style built around the consumption of commodities. The dynamic of the strip's history followed the construction of personality around a commodity. Walt and the other characters were shaped by the feature's original focus on automobiles. Their relationships to cars defined their selves and social positions. The personalities of the strip's characters were so tied to the consumption of automobiles that Walt Wallet's social position declined in rough proportion to the increased availability of cars. By 1928 King's story lines had depleted Walt's finances to the point where he took a job for the first
time, Walt became a sales manager for a furniture company, and eventually the general manager, which allowed him to retain his middle-class status although at a less secure level.12

As King developed his characters, the strip shifted from gags about male fixation on automobiles to more socially oriented humor about the ways and means to consume commodities. This metamorphosis can be seen in the contrast between panels from 1919 and 1921. In the first panel, from January 5, 1919, when the feature appeared only on Sunday in the editorial section, anonymous women look down on a group of men gathered in an alley. The men are discussing the operation of automobiles and ignoring their wives’ demands that they come inside to dinner. The second panel, a daily from February 5, 1921, shows Emily, Amy, and Hazel discussing their chances of persuading their respective spouses to purchase new cars. King framed the panel so that the women look out at their husbands, who are discussing Walt’s new car. Rather than disparaging their husbands’ interest in cars, the women are now interested in acquiring newer models. There is a suggestion of the status the women seek from car ownership in Doc’s wife saying, “I want an enclosed car but Doctor is afraid I’ll want him to dress up as my chauffeur!” This comment suggests that a closed car was more prestigious than an open car and so required a chauffeur as an appropriate mark of class position. Sinclair Lewis made much the same point in Babbitt: “In the city of Zenith . . . a family’s motor indicated its social rank as precisely as the grades of the peerage determined the rank of an English family.” A closed car designated top rank. This type of commentary on consumption became a mainstay of “Gasoline Alley.”15

“Gasoline Alley” did not simply reflect the growing importance of consumer goods. Nor did it urge readers to consume with a single-minded passion. Instead the strip commented on consumption, delineating the appropriate ways for the middle class to consume. In late 1920 King drew a number of episodes that comment directly on behavior associated with the consumption of commodities. Most of these strips deal with the need to purchase gifts for others at Christmas. On December 12, 1920, Walt discovered that all his ideas for gifts had already been purchased for their intended recipients by other friends. In the December 16, 1920, strip Walt and Doc discuss the gifts the Gasoline Alley wives seek from their husbands.

Both these strips depict the exchange of purchased gifts as an appropriate practice at Christmas. They also show a richly commodified society and knowledgeable consumers. In the first episode Walt and his friends can choose from an array of products, including sweaters, automobile tools, spare parts and accessories, toy cars, and driving gloves. In the second episode Emily wants a new dining room set and Amy a fur coat. Doc’s wife, Hazel, a more canny consumer, wants cash so that she can make her own purchases at the post-Christmas sales. Although consumption is important to the humor of both these strips, it is a given against which the joke is played out. In the first strip, Walt is able to guess what Emily is buying Avery for Christmas based on the purchases of his other friends. The joke is Emily’s shock at the presence of Walt’s guess. In the other episode the joke turns on the way wives dictate patterns of consumption and Walt’s reliance that he is not married.

This latter episode may seem to be a critique of consumption as a feminizing activity. But other installments of the strip make it clear that King accepted consumption as a given and was mostly concerned with the means, and appropriate ways, of consuming. On December 18, 1920, Bill, Walt, Avery, and Doc gathered in a garage and reminisced about Christmases past. With its nostalgia about the domestic production of gifts, this episode might also be read as a critique of consumer culture, but the force of the strip is directed not at the purchase of gifts per se but at the high cost of those goods. This meaning is made clear in Avery’s statement that “now days you buy ‘em and the war tax on what you get is as much as the presents themselves used to cost.” Doc adds, “My father used to come home with four dollars worth of dress goods and make a hit. If I get by this year without a bond issue I’m lucky!” Bygone days could be recalled fondly. But the issue at hand was the cost of commodities, not a return to domestic production.14

King also commented on the qualities of consumer culture by contrasting the behavior of his characters. For instance, he depicted Avery as a miser who rarely made a purchase. One of the first daily episodes of the strip shows the other characters discussing Avery and Emily.15 The consensus is that Avery is “close with his coin at times,” “a nickel looks as big to him as a manhole cover,” and Avery and Emily “can afford lots more” than those present. Avery’s stinginess became a recurring joke in “Gasoline Alley.” On January 28, 1923, Walt and Skeezix came across Avery at the automobile show, sitting in the most expen-
sive car on display. Avery derived his pleasure not from the contemplation of new car ownership but from his estimate of the money he saved by running his old car, some $41,000 over twenty years. The expression on Walt’s face in the final panel indicates that he thinks Avery’s notion of pleasure through thrift is ill-conceived.

Walt spent his money freely. On July 12, 1921, he purchased a whole new wardrobe for a road trip to Yellowstone Park. On July 24, 1921, he spent sixty dollars on a calf because his adopted son, Skeezix, could not be parted from it. On November 15, 1921, King depicted Walt’s house complete with a phonograph cabinet well stocked with records. The March 4, 1923, episode shows Walt with a new radio and Skeezix with an ample collection of toys. King played on the contrast between Avery’s stinginess and Walt’s willingness to consume for the strip’s humor. Avery’s behavior transgressed that expected from members of the middle class, who the strip suggested should denote their class position through consumption of commodities. Although Walt made inappropriate purchases, such as his road trip outfit, which his friends laughed at, it was the particular items, not the act of consumption, that were the objects of humor and derision.

King occasionally expressed his unhappiness with features of modern society, but, as with those about domestic production, these comments most often took the form of nostalgic resignation rather than critical engagement with the direction of society. In the Sunday, November 13, 1932, episode, Walt and Skeezix discover that the country road on which they used to take their hikes has been replaced by a concrete road complete with billboards, hot dog stands, and a gas station. Walt states that “the old meandering lanes were charming but they must make way for progress. . . . but you can’t help feeling a bit sorry that they’re disappearing.”

Two earlier installments of the strip made it clear just what King meant by progress. On July 28, 1929, he showed Walt reminiscing about his childhood and its lack of modern commodities. After Walt lists the things he did not have as a child—including movies, sodas, ice cream cones, automobiles, electric lights, telephones, vacuum cleaners, electric fans, and toasters—Skeezix asks if Walt knew George Washington. Walt’s response is surprise. Skeezix’s casual manner—he has his hands in his pockets and at eight years old is too young to be sarcastic—suggests that the question is a reasonable one for a child to ask. Walt’s surprise, indicated in comic art style by his hat popping off his head, is at the question’s appropriateness. To Skeezix, and to Walt when he thinks about it, a time without those commodities is as ancient as Washington’s lifetime. The October 18, 1930, episode, in which Walt and Skeezix enjoy shop window displays, is further evidence that King understood progress as an abundance of commodities. He believed the charms of the countryside had to be sacrificed to this progress because it represented a social advance.17

King’s single, and somewhat tentative, criticism of consumer culture was that it encouraged speculation. In December 1928 Walt, acting on a tip from Bill that the price would soon increase, purchased stock in the Rubber Keyhole company on margin. On December 16 Walt worried that if the stockbroker called his margin he would be finished. By December 21 the price of the stock had increased enough for Walt to buy expensive Christmas presents for the whole family. The company’s stock improved steadily into 1929, and on January 10 Walt and his wife, Phyllis, discussed buying a new dining room outfit and a dressing table, even though two days earlier Walt did not have four dollars in cash for a kitchen mixer Phyllis wanted. (Walt and Phyllis had married on June 24, 1926.) Although the profit Walt expected had not yet been realized, Phyllis was determined to shop around. Shortly after, the stock slid from a high of 28.5 points to 17.0 points before Walt could sell.

On January 30, 1929, Walt figured the 11.5 points difference between the stock’s high point and his selling price as a loss, but Doc pointed out that, because Walt had originally purchased at 15.0 points, the loss was only on paper. Doc, who had bought high and sold low, spoke of his own loss as “real money . . . not money chalked up somewhere on somebody’s books but money I’ve earned, fingered and had a personal acquaintance with.” Not altogether convinced by Doc’s argument, Walt stuck to the notion that he had lost money (see Figure 24). The next day he discovered the true cost of his speculation when Phyllis revealed she had bought a bedroom set on time payment. In these episodes King presented stock speculation as promoting a false conception of wealth, which led to inappropriate expenditures. Both Walt and Phyllis risked their family’s well-being by anticipating the profit to be had from speculation.

Phyllis’s irresponsible purchase of a commodity on time payment may seem incidental to the broader message about the foolishness of playing the stock market, but the need to make payments was the only encumbrance the Wallets bore following their speculation. Given the

melodramatic quality of extended comic strip story lines, which rewarded virtue and punished wrongdoing, the time payments can be read as a form of penance. Furthermore, King presented time payment itself as an unwarranted speculation. When Phyllis made the arrangement to purchase the bedroom set, she too gambled on the insecure prospect of wealth.

King made his condemnation of time payment as an imprudent means of consumption explicit in a story line featuring the adolescent Skeezix. In December 1938 Skeezix gave his girlfriend Nina Cluck a radio for Christmas. Unable to afford the present outright, he arranged to pay for it at ten cents a day. By January 16, 1939, Skeezix had discovered that although it had not seemed like a hardship at the outset, the payment became a burdensome daily worry. At the end of January the payment had become the source of all his troubles, so Skeezix arranged to sell a half interest in his dilapidated car to cover the debt. His loss of the exclusive ownership of his car disrupted his courtship of Nina and undermined his friendship with Gooch, to whom he had sold the half interest. Both these stories suggested that consumption is prudent only when the means are readily available.

King’s condemnation of time payment was ironic because the expansion of installment credit was linked to the automobile industry that he celebrated. Martha Olney demonstrates a connection between the automobile industry and the expansion of purchases on time payment. Beginning with the General Motors Acceptance Corporation (GMAC), established in 1919, automobile manufacturers set up finance companies to smooth seasonal fluctuations in consumption and so hold down the cost of adjusting production. These companies financed the purchase of automobiles through time payment. They enjoyed so much success—in 1929 consumers owed five times as much for car purchases as they had in 1922—that entrepreneurs established finance companies to provide credit for other consumer goods. In 1920 there were fewer than 100 finance companies. By 1928 there were over 1,000. In the 1920s “most credit extended to households to facilitate purchases of durable goods was installment credit extended by . . . sales finance companies.” Household debt increased at a rate of fourteen dollars per year in the 1920s as opposed to an annual increase of four dollars before the First World War.

“Gasoline Alley” was not an analysis of America’s economic development in the 1920s. Rather in it Frank King commented on the appropriate ways and means of incorporating commodities into middle-class lives. King depicted characters whose personalities shaped the products they consumed and the way they consumed them. But at the same time the centrality of commodities, particularly automobiles, to the strip’s origin and format governed King’s development of the characters’ personalities. “Gasoline Alley” depicted middle-class lives in which the consumption of commodities constituted both the core of individual character and the basis for social relations among characters. The strip implied that one should only undertake consumption when one had the wealth to do so at hand. In King’s view ownership of specific commodities should designate standards of wealth. His sole criticism of consumer culture was that it tended to promote ways of consumption that undermined the function of commodities as symbols of status.

King understood the link between the array of new commodities and the disappearance of the old countryside, which he described as progress, but he drew no conclusion about the contemporaneous availability of time payment. Mass production, particularly in the automobile industry, was responsible for the new commodities King alluded to, and time payment facilitated the mass consumption of these products. “Gasoline Alley” demonstrates his uncertainty about the formation and display of middle-class identity in the face of mass consumption. But the strip was not critical of the consumption of commodities.
A comic strip may seem an unlikely place to look for a critique of consumer culture. Nonetheless a contemporary of King's, Martin Branner, did develop a muted criticism in his strip "Winnie Winkle."

"WINNIE WINKLE": WORKING-CLASS ASPIRATION AND CONSUMPTION

"Winnie Winkle" commenced publication September 21, 1920. The daily and Sunday comic strip ran in the New York Daily News and the Chicago Tribune, and the Tribune-News Syndicate distributed it to other newspapers across the country. "Winnie Winkle" was the first of a genre of "working girl" comic strips. Until 1943 it carried the subtitle "The Breadwinner." The strip's creator, Martin Branner, set it in a large city, sometimes named Central City but most probably based on New York City, where Branner lived. The title character worked to support her lazy, stay-at-home father (Rip), her mother, and her adopted brother (Perry). Winnie was a stenographer who desired a middle-class life. In the early years of the strip Branner contrasted Winnie's aspirations to the behavior of Patricia (Patsy) Dugan, an office colleague who became Winnie's friend on October 6, 1920. Patsy's language, appearance, and outlook were clearly working class.

There are no accounts of Branner's inspiration for the strip, but it started less than a month after the enactment of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. Branner also created the strip against a backdrop of substantial changes in the status of women's work. The shortage of labor during America's involvement in the First World War led women to enter occupations previously closed to them. The expansion of the nation's businesses in the first two decades of the century, with the attendant centralization of control and management, created office jobs that women filled. It is not clear that Branner favored or opposed women working and voting. The only sure thing "Winnie Winkle" can tell us about its creator is that he used the changing position of women as a source for his humor. His underlying theme was the place of women in society. He depicted American society as one in which the consumption of commodities was expanding, driven in part by a working class that sought to emulate the middle class. He associated this move to a consumer culture with a feminine desire for display.

Branner was not alone in regarding consumption as a feminine activity. In the 1920s a consensus existed among advertisers that women purchased between 70 and 85 percent of manufactured commodities. As Charles McGovern of the Smithsonian Institution has pointed out, advertisers depicted consumption as a social movement through which women could exercise their rights. Although couched in a language of political entitlement, the rights advertisers envisaged for women were often limited to product selection. For instance, "Are Women People?" a 1928 advertisement for the weekly magazine Liberty, presented an image of women made over by the consumption of commodities into people who read the same magazines as men. This advertisement posited that women became people, with personalities, through consumption. But whereas advertisers employed the vision of women as consumers to sell products, Branner incorporated the notion into a nascent criticism of consumer culture.

The creator of "Winnie Winkle" developed his critique in three recurring story lines. First, he satirized Winnie's consumer-driven personality and behavior in stories about her search for social advancement and an appropriate mate. Second, he memorialized a fading vaudeville era and counterposed it to Hollywood's centralized production of entertainment. Finally, Branner criticized the commercialization of culture and depicted celebrity product endorsement as "sissy." In all these stories he exhibited a concern about the suitability of public display and the construction of images. "Winnie Winkle" commented on the appropriateness of incorporating commodities into working-class lives.

Branner's lampoons of Winnie's attempts to break into a higher class counterposed effete, richly commodified, middle-class lives with working-class lives. In his presentation the middle class derived pleasure from purchased commodities whereas working-class leisure was more organic in its use of available resources. Branner favored the twelve-panel Sunday version of the strip for these stories. The basic plot of these episodes had Winnie embarrassed by the low-class antics of either her work-shy father or more often her adopted brother, Perry. For instance, on June 25, 1922, Winnie and Perry attended a society party aboard a private motor yacht. Perry, who went under protest, decided to join his friends who were swimming off a pier that the yacht passed. He stripped off his clothes and dove into the water. Perry's actions mortified Winnie, who tried to retrieve him only to
compound her embarrassment by falling into the water herself. Branner derived a large part of the episode's humor from Winnie's humiliation. But the joke depended on contrasting the kids swimming off the pier and enjoying themselves with Perry, who was unhappily dressed in a formal suit.23

Perry hated the suits Winnie made him wear and took every opportunity to rid himself of them and engage in rough play with his friends. For instance, in the Sunday, May 14, 1922, episode, published before the strip went to a full page on Sunday, Perry exchanged his suit with another boy so that he could play baseball with the neighborhood gang. Perry frequently discarded the clothes in which Winnie dressed him to play, work, or simply avoid embarrassment.24 Winnie generally punished Perry with a beating for his refusal to conform to her notion of appropriate dress and behavior, but occasionally her brother had the last laugh. In the May 21, 1922, episode Perry is spanked for doing “vulgar” dance steps with children at a society party. But at the end of the strip, to Winnie’s puzzlement, Perry wins favor with the young society women by showing them the steps. The deliberate irony here is that Perry had picked up skills on the streets that gave him entrée to the social set Winnie hoped to enter.

Branner also presented Winnie’s search for romantic love as an attempt to improve her class position and her ability to consume. He cast these stories as melodramas in which Winnie failed to find happiness because she had compromised her virtue in the selection of a suitor. For Winnie, love was only possible with a professional gentleman, such as a banker, doctor, or lawyer, who could provide for her needs. She rejected an inappropriate elderly, wealthy suitor but considered a stockbroker twenty years her senior until he was revealed as a potential bigamist. The forty-three-year-old stockbroker Kenneth Dare first appeared in the strip on October 9, 1922. On November 3, 1922, Branner revealed to the readers, but not to Winnie, that he was already married. Dare and Winnie made marriage plans before Dare’s wife exposed him as a would-be bigamist on January 24, 1923.25

Branner used Mike Mulligan, Winnie’s hick suitor, who first appeared in the strip on May 14, 1923, to highlight her tendency to associate wealth with happiness. Mulligan was an ill-dressed backcountry dweller. Short on manners, grooming, and intelligence, he was long on patience. For years he ignored Winnie’s disinterest and pursued her relentlessly. Branner used Mulligan to lampoon fads. In December 1923 he had Mulligan go to college to play football. He picked up the language and mannerisms of the college set but was clumsy in their use. Although she was not interested in marrying Mulligan, Winnie enjoyed his attention and became somewhat jealous when she discovered his attraction to a college “widow.” Eventually, when another man appeared on the scene, Winnie got tired of Mulligan’s boorish behavior, and he disappeared from the strip for two years. When Mulligan next entered the strip in January 1926, he had acquired some social graces and a good deal of money. His newfound wealth appeared to come from his “interior decorator” business, but in fact he was a bootlegger. Branner apprised his readers of this fact a week after Mulligan reappeared. Attracted by his riches, Winnie agreed to marriage, only to be left at the altar, once again, when Mulligan was arrested.26

The Mike Mulligan stories followed much the same theme as the Kenneth Dare installment. Branner created the comedy of the college episode, and the melodrama of the bootlegger chapter, around the basic fact that Winnie wanted to get married but could not find the right partner. His use of the melodramatic formula set up a contest between Winnie’s virtue and her consumer desire. Although Winnie desired a husband with the means to buy what she wanted, she disapproved of intertemperance and bootleggers. The bootlegger episode also showed the failure of an attempt to legislate morality because most of the citizenry willingly colluded with Mulligan’s activities. Branner’s primary audience lived in the “wet” cities of New York and Chicago, and the story was probably written to their tastes. But his audience could have read the bootlegger episode, and Winnie’s temperate attitude, as a demonstration of her hypocrisy given her relentless need to consume. In short, Winnie’s virtue could not be squared with her need to consume.27

Branner liked to make fun of Winnie’s consumer desire. The October 7, 1928, strip shows Winnie so distracted by shopping that she neglects a friend’s baby she is minding and even mistakes a rubber cart for its pram. The episode works on two levels. First, Branner employed the straightforward gag of Winnie mistaking a trash cart for a baby carriage. Then he drew on the underlying humor of Winnie’s distraction. This component played off the notion of a woman’s vanity and her need to consume to enhance her self-image. Branner reinforced his gendering of vanity and consumption by having only men laugh at Winnie.

Winnie’s concern with her appearance fit the visual design of the strip. Every day Branner drew her wearing a new outfit. He resolved the dilemma of Winnie’s ability to afford such fashion on her modest
income in a 1921 series of strips. Responding to a reader's letter, Branner had Winnie follow by Gum-Shoe Gus, a detective, to ascertain the source of her extensive wardrobe. On October 28, 1921, Gus discovered that Winnie had a deal with a fashion shop to "model" their clothes in the strip. It was a clever story. Branner justified his depiction of Winnie in new outfits every day, indicated that readers were interested in the strip and that he paid attention to them, and made a self-referential claim that Winnie was an important enough comic strip celebrity that she modeled clothes on contract. After this story ran Branner occasionally drew Winnie modeling clothes rather than providing a gag or story continuity. He also used Winnie's modeling status in a number of story lines from the 1920s to the 1950s. In the 1950s Winnie parlayed her modeling experience into a job, first as a dress designer and eventually as the chief executive of a large fashion house. But "Winnie Winkle" was Branner's conceit from start to finish. If the structure of the strip demanded that Winnie be fashionably dressed, then Branner's ridicule of women's vanity was directed at his own image of women and his own success as a comic strip artist.

Although Branner criticized the economy of display embodied by consumer culture as feminine, he drew strips that reinforced the desirability of feminine women. For instance, in a series of strips in June 1924 Winnie toyed with the idea of getting a flapper haircut. On June 11 she decided to get her hair bobbed, "and be done with it." But while she waited her turn at the hairdresser's, Winnie observed two effeminate men discussing their "boyish" bob cuts. Disturbed by this gender transgression, Winnie left the salon expressing her intention to get a "longshoreman style" cut.

Another 1924 episode offers more evidence that Branner understood the effect of feminine display and used it to win and hold an audience for "Winnie Winkle." In the November 22 strip Winnie comments on the difficulty a "working girl" has in keeping a good "reputation these days," and proclaims, "Heavens knows I'm leading a clean life!" (See Figure 25.) The gag turns on the definition of "clean." Winnie leads a "clean" life in the sense that the strip shows her taking a bath, but in taking a bath she exposes herself to the reader's gaze, which was surely not "clean" in terms of respectability. Branner entitled the strip "A Saturday Soliloquy," indicating that the episode should be read as a scene in a play in which an actor addresses the audience directly. Such scenes generally provide the audience and character with a shared knowledge that excludes other players, in this case the intimacy of Winnie's bath. Branner not only created the scene for readers' titillation but labeled it as such.

The artist later recalled that he had had to be careful about the settings in which he showed Winnie dressing and undressing. So long as he depicted her behind a bolted door, the strip would pass syndicate censorship. As had Outcault and earlier comic strip artists, Branner set out to appeal to a heterosocial audience. He created love stories and depictions of fashion for the strip's female readers and jokes about her consumer desire and burlesque displays for the male readers. The only readership figures for "Winnie Winkle" show that slightly more males than females read it. In the November 22 strip Branner showed there was nothing unconscious about his use of feminine display to sell the comic strip as a commodity.

Branner was not totally at odds with consumer culture. As well as having had a prurient interest in the display of the female body, he seems to have enjoyed radio. At the end of 1924 Winnie received a radio as a Christmas present. Branner used the occasion for a series of gags about the difficulty of tuning in stations and the hazards of wearing headphones. At first he treated radio as a fade to be lampooned, then passed over for another subject. On January 10, 1925, after exhausting his radio gags, Branner shifted to jokes about crossword puzzles. But radio was no fade. As had comic strips it became part of everyday life. An annotation on the January 2, 1925, strip contained in
Branner’s file suggests that he got his first radio at this time. An amateur enthusiast made it for him.

Branner returned to the radio as a subject of gags on a number of occasions. On November 17, 1926, he had Winnie fall in love with a radio announcer’s voice. He spun this gag out for three weeks before Winnie discovered the announcer was ugly. By this stage the family radio had speakers. On September 16, 1928, much to his family’s annoyance, Pa invented an early form of Muzak by piping the radio’s sound through the house heating ducts. On September 13, 1931, a radio show made Pa believe there were burglars in the house. On June 11, 1933, the violence in a dime novel Pa read to Perry overshadowed the action of a radio serial. These strips were lighthearted jabs at the intrusion of modernity into private life. But the 1933 episode suggests that Branner thought radio simply a new medium of entertainment no worse than dime novels. Nonetheless, he retained a nostalgia for those dime novels.

Branner’s nostalgia for a bygone era was most evident in his stories about vaudeville. He preferred vaudeville to movies and stated his case for the former a number of times in “Winnie Winkle.” For instance, on March 8, 1925, he reproduced a Haverly’s Minstrel Bill and commented that the show beat moving pictures. In September 1927 he had Winnie win a movie contract in a bathing beauty contest. She discovered the film company was simply a front for the moneymaking activities of the beauty pageants. But she stayed in Hollywood and eventually got a starring role in a movie through the intervention of a producer whose son’s life she had saved. Winnie became engaged to the director of the movie, but he misdirected her performance because he was secretly involved with another actress. Eventually, the director cut Winnie’s scenes from the movie, which proved to be a flop, robbed the producer, and left for Australia. Winnie hung in on Hollywood for another month before deciding to return home on March 7, 1928.

Because she had no money she had to work her way back across the country. One of Winnie’s jobs on this trip was with a vaudeville revue. In contrast to Hollywood’s back-stabbing atmosphere, Branner presented the vaudeville players as a tight-knit group. But his vision of vaudeville was not idyllic. After two weeks on the road the manager of the troupe disappeared with the takings. Branner then recalled vaudevillians’ struggle against management by mentioning the White Rats, a 1910s attempt by performers to establish a union. His implied criticism was that management was to blame for the demise of vaudeville. Winnie eventually arrived home at the end of May 1928.

But Branner was not done with vaudeville. He returned to the subject eleven years later, when Winnie attempted to earn a living as part of a dance act. Between April and August 1940 Winnie participated in an effort to revive vaudeville. But even though the troupe was self-managed, the revival failed, and Winnie, her partner, and agent headed for Hollywood. No matter how Branner tried to recapture the joys of vaudeville, he was forced to acknowledge its passing and replacement by Hollywood’s movies. In the language of the comic strip Branner could only express resignation to this fact and present it as an inevitable development. But he did try to criticize other forms of consumer culture that, like Hollywood, employed the images of well-known figures to sell commodities.

Branner used “Winnie Winkle” to ridicule celebrity endorsements and image-centered advertising. In April 1929, during one of Winnie’s many stints working for the Bibb’s Pin Company, Branner introduced Ad Lib, an advertising expert. To increase the sales of pins Ad Lib embarked on a campaign featuring Winnie as the Bibb’s Pin Girl. Her image appeared on billboards and garnered much attention. But the attention was for Winnie, not for Bibb’s pins. Letters poured in to the company offering Winnie substantial sums to endorse other products. Mr. Bibb ordered her posters covered up, which gave Branner the chance to rework some visual gags from the days of Pack and other late nineteenth-century illustrated humor journals.

Branner’s notion that advertising campaigns featuring spokespersons were ineffectual, because they focused attention on the person not the commodity, echoed the sentiments of the Hearst executive Hawley Turner. But Branner took his critique a step further and suggested that celebrity endorsement was dishonest. On May 1, 1933, gazing out her office window, Winnie found herself attracted to the visage of the Doggy shirt collar model on a billboard. Wishing to meet the model, Jack Linyard, she persuaded Mr. Bibb to hire him for an advertising campaign. When Jack called on her at home on May 17, Winnie discovered that he did not use any of the products he advertised. Pa, who had overheard the conversation, commented, “That guy ain’t on th’ level!!” Winnie, too, was troubled by Jack’s deception and broke off with him.

For Branner the dishonesty of celebrity endorsements was unmanly
and a sign of a feminized, consumer culture. He made this opinion clear in an indictment in 1935. The story line at the time featured Marty Mulligan, Mike’s cousin, a contender for the world heavyweight boxing championship. On June 14 Marty, who had won enough fights to make him a celebrity, signed five contracts and told Winnie, “Me fortune’s made!” Rather than fight contracts, Marty had signed for a cigarette testimonial, a talcum powder ad, a vaudeville engagement, a silk pajama testimonial, and a nightclub job. His actions disgusted Winnie, and she said he was a “big sissy.” (Paradoxically, the strip appeared directly above a celebrity endorsement for Welch’s grape juice, see Figure 26.) The episode’s critique seems to have been directed at cigarette testimonials. At the time the R. J. Reynolds tobacco company was running a series of comic-art-format advertisements for Camel cigarettes in the comic section of the Daily News and other newspapers across the country. These advertisements featured endorsements by leading sporting figures, such as the champion golfer Gene Sarazen.36

Branner had not licensed any of his characters to promote commodities, which added credence to his critique.37 But it was ironic that this artist who drew a strip about a “working girl” found the most damning thing about consumer culture to be its unmanliness. If males who lent their images to advertisements were “sissy,” and if consumption was a female activity, then what of Branner, whose career was based on creating images of women for national consumption as a comic strip? He may have thought of himself as a male commentator on the feminization of culture, but he encouraged and benefited from the promotion of this culture.38

Even when Branner directly criticized celebrity endorsements, he did nothing more than counterpose one celebrity image who was against them, Winnie Winkle, with another—say Gene Sarazen—who made endorsements. On the one hand, Branner’s critique of celebrity endorsements reduced them to an inappropriate mechanism for promoting consumption because they were dishonest or unmanly. On the other hand, he probably regarded his favorable treatments of vaudeville and radio as appropriate because his stories flowed from honest contact with the forms. But there was little difference between advertisement and comic strip presentations of these commodities. The advertisements containing celebrity endorsements of products and comic strips such as “Winnie Winkle” both promoted a vision of life as a matter of style in the selection of commodities.

Branner’s and King’s commentaries on consumer culture were ordered by the status of their strips as commodities. For instance, as “Gasoline Alley” developed from a weekly gag panel to a daily comic strip, King had to adapt to the form of syndicated strips and develop a cast of characters. His original conception of the feature as a humorous observation on the effects of automobiles on middle-class lives determined these characters’ personalities as consumers of automobiles and other commodities. In King’s stories the characters were figureheads for a commentary on the appropriate ways and means of consuming. Branner’s humor in “Winnie Winkle” relied on Winnie’s consumer desire. But he created her desire to sell the comic strip. “Winnie Winkle” replicated the images of the consumer culture Branner criticized. King and Branner created their comic strips for a mass commercial medium. “Gasoline Alley” and “Winnie Winkle” were commodities that advertised the values and practices of consumer culture in the form of entertainment. Comic strip artists such as King and Branner promoted a vision of American life that centered on obtaining and consuming commodities. They envisioned consumer lifestyles.