IAN GORDON

Comic Strips and Consumer Culture

1890–1945

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION PRESS

Washington and London
disappeared with the end of the nineteenth century, and the comic strip complete with characters, panels, and word balloons blossomed. By March 1901 Opper used word balloons in almost all his comic strip work. Moreover the other regular artists on the Journal—Rudolph and Gus Dirks, James Swinnerton, and Carl Anderson—followed his lead. By June 1901 comic strips dominated the Journal's comic supplement. And “Happy Hooligan” and “The Katzenjammer Kids” set a standard for the art form. Within a year newspapers throughout America began to carry comic strips in their Sunday editions and the strips became one of the most widely consumed forms of the emerging entertainment mass media.

William Randolph Hearst, the proprietor of the New York Journal, more fully utilized comic art's potential to sell newspapers than did Joseph Pulitzer or any other publisher. He outbid Pulitzer for the services of the most popular artists. Between 1896 and 1901 the contributors to the Journal's comic supplement—Richard Outcault, Rudolph Dirks, Frederick Opper, and others—fashioned the comic strip. In particular Dirks in “The Katzenjammer Kids” and Opper in “Happy Hooligan” refined the combination of character, word balloons, and panel layout that define modern comic strips. Hearst used the comic strips produced in New York in his other papers, such as the San Francisco Examiner. In 1902 he further offset his heavy costs for comic strips by selling them to newspapers around the country, thus opening a national market for strips. As early as 1903 at least forty-eight newspapers in thirty-three locations carried comic strips, and by 1908 this figure had grown to at least eighty-three newspapers in fifty locations.¹

Concurrent with the development of a national market for comic strips, Richard Outcault began to license a new strip, “Buster Brown,” created in 1902 in the pages of the New York Herald, to the manufacturers of a wide variety of products. With “Buster Brown” comic strip characters reached their full potential as marketing tools for other products. The range of Buster Brown merchandise available in 1908 would be envied by more recent licensees of comic art phenomena.
such as Batman, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and the Simpsons. The importance of Buster Brown’s marketing is that it predated, and presaged, a wholesale shift from text-based to visual, image-centered advertising. Advertisers used Buster Brown as an eye-catching image and as a symbol of qualities to be associated with their product. Buster Brown was a protean type of the form advertising assumed in twentieth-century America’s mass culture of consumption. He transcended the comic art form to become a cultural icon. But this success was rooted in the national distribution of comic strips through local newspapers.

THE NATIONAL SPREAD OF COMIC STRIPS

By 1903 newspapers across the country carried comic strip supplements in their Sunday editions. This expansion placed comic strip characters and the art form before a wide national audience, laying the basis for their use in other products. It also provided urban and rural readers with a weekly shared experience and brought together diverse national audiences as markets for mass media products. Apart from the healthy increases in circulation that the New York papers experienced when they introduced comic strips, two factors contributed to the rapid spread of the art form through the nation: the growth of syndication and the consolidation of control by newspaper chains. Both the World and the Journal organized syndicates to sell comic strip features to other papers. Independent syndicates, which began to supply feature material to newspapers, particularly Sunday papers, in the 1880s developed their own comic supplements that were sold to papers across the nation. Also by 1900 eight newspaper chains existed, the largest of which was the nine-paper chain of Edward W. Scripps.

Hearst was a key figure in the development of both syndicated material and newspaper chains. By 1903 the comic art that originated in Hearst papers appeared in at least seventeen newspapers across the country, and Hearst himself owned six papers in four cities. According to Frank Mott, by 1922 “Hearst owned twenty daily papers and eleven Sunday papers in thirteen of the largest American cities.” The consolidation of the production and distribution of comic strips proceeded with the centralization of newspapers, news dissemination, and business and industry in general.

Irving Bachelor set up the first successful company to syndicate feature material in 1883. In 1884 Samuel S. McClure established his syndicate, which distributed the stories of Rudyard Kipling, Jack London, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Robert Louis Stevenson. The syndicates sold the bulk of their material to newspapers for use in Sunday editions. Larger Sunday newspapers also syndicated some of their features, with both the New York Herald and the Journal beginning to do so in 1895. The World started to syndicate its material in 1898. In 1897 the St. Louis Post-Dispatch began to carry the World’s comic supplement, but this was not syndication as such because both papers were owned by Pulitzer. Around this time newspaper owners led by Hearst began to syndicate comic strips. “The Katzenjammer Kids,” carried on January 6, 1901, by the Pittsburgh Post in black and white as part of its magazine section, is the first syndicated strip I found, but there may have been earlier occurrences. Most likely comic strips did not appear in color outside major cities such as New York, Chicago, and St. Louis in the late 1890s because color web presses would have been a prohibitive capital investment for most publishers.

Hearst was probably the first to distribute a color comic supplement nationally. In 1900 he established two papers in Chicago: the morning Chicago Examiner and the evening Chicago American. This move gave Hearst three Sunday papers: the San Francisco and Chicago Examiners and the New York Journal. The San Francisco Examiner first contained a color comic supplement on November 4, 1900. Previously it had carried comic strips in black and white in the magazine section. The supplement in the San Francisco Examiner was identical to the Journal’s and was either preprinted or reproduced from stereotype matrices. It seems reasonable to assume that Hearst’s Sunday Chicago paper began to carry the comic supplement at that time because its inclusion would have required little additional cost. Other papers to carry color comic strip supplements from Hearst around this time included the Memphis Commercial Appeal, which first contained a color comic supplement on March 16, 1902, and the Seattle Daily Times. In addition newspapers in Denver, Atlanta, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Omaha, Cincinnati, Columbus, Pittsburgh, Nashville, Richmond, and Spokane carried comic art from Hearst by the end of 1903. And on December 12, 1903, the first issue of Hearst’s Los Angeles Examiner appeared, giving him four Sunday newspapers.
By 1903 other syndicates had begun to distribute comic supplements nationally. Newspapers in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Minneapolis carried the New York Herald's strips. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the Pittsburgh Dispatch carried the New York World's strips. Additional syndicates that provided comic strips included the World Color Printing Company (unconnected to Pulitzer's World) and the T. C. McClure Syndicate, a product of the company founded by Samuel McClure. Papers in Louisville, Baltimore, Boston, St. Louis, Anaconda, Portland, Pittsburgh, Nashville, Knoxville, and Richmond carried the World Color Printing Company's material. The McClure Syndicate's strips appeared in San Francisco, Atlanta, Indianapolis, Topeka, Detroit, Minneapolis, New York, Houston, and Milwaukee papers. Another smaller organization, the C. J. Hirt company, syndicated material to papers in Augusta, Chicago, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Helena, and Pittsburgh. Two Philadelphia papers, the North American and the Inquirer, as well as the Boston Globe, developed their own comic strips. The combined population of these cities and towns was 11,747,977, or 15.45 percent of the U.S. population. Because some of these papers, such as the Memphis Commercial Appeal, acted as regional papers, well over 20 percent of the population at this date had access to comic strips. Thus comic strips were a national and not an exclusively urban phenomenon by 1903.

Comic strips attracted the interest of newspaper publishers because they helped to increase circulation. The Memphis Commercial Appeal's Sunday circulation rose from 29,475 in 1901 to 35,292 in 1902 after the introduction of comic strips on March 16, 1902. The Topeka Daily Capital's Sunday circulation rose from 15,500 in October 1903 to 16,741 in January 1904 after strips commenced on November 22, 1903.

These circulation figures also give some idea of the regional circulation of the papers. In 1900 Memphis had a population of 102,320, and Topeka 33,608. Either one in three people in Memphis and one in two people in Topeka bought these papers or a good part of their circulation was outside the city limits. My data summarized in Table 1 (see the appendix) show that the national aggregate circulation of newspapers with comic strips in 1903 equaled 42.7 percent of the population in the centers where they were published. This figure suggests that most of these papers had significant sales outside their census-defined bases. The establishment of Rural Free Delivery by the Post Office between 1898 and 1906 boosted urban newspapers' rural circulations. By 1903 newspapers across the country carried comic strips, and the circulation of papers with strips rose, suggesting that comics were a popular feature. Moreover, many of these newspapers carried the same strips.8

By 1908 syndicates had brought comic strips to the nation and established methods of distributing their product that continue to the present. Between 1903 and 1908 newspapers in twenty-four locations added comic strips while only two dropped them. Almost 75 percent of Sunday newspapers had strips. The additional locations and the increase in population between 1903 and 1908 added almost 6 million readers to the potential comic strip audience. At the same time, twelve newspapers began to publish strips in major locations, such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and Cincinnati, where they were already carried by papers in 1903. Both the potential readership and the availability of comic strips to that readership increased notably.9

In this period the major syndicates all expanded their coverage of the market. Their growth increased the chances that comic strip readers across the country read the same material. Almost all comic strips originated from six companies, and three (Hearst, World Color Co., and McClure) controlled over three-quarters of the market. For instance, in 1908 Hearst strips were available to 66.00 percent of potential comic strip readers and McClure's to 57.79 percent. In short between 1901 and 1908 newspaper publishers and syndicates helped shape the New York phenomenon of comic strips into a shared national cultural artifact. Every Sunday Americans across the country could open their newspapers and read the same strips (see Tables 2 and 3 in the appendix).

The rapid spread and popularity of comic strips provoked a debate over their worth. One contemporary critic of strips regarded the Sunday editions of American newspapers as serving "a single community" but found no place for comic strips in that world. This critic's unsigned 1909 editorial in Ladies' Home Journal attacked comics as vulgar and cheap. Other articles that assailed the vulgarity of comics echoed her sentiments. In general these articles, which appeared with some frequency between 1906 and 1912, argued that comic strips eroded the moral fiber of the young by overstimulating their senses. Underlying the thrust of these articles was an uneasiness with a developing mass culture in which "the very element of variety has been
obliterated.” As one critic wrote in 1908, the comic supplement was for people “who don't care for fine shades of humor, because they can't appreciate them.”

In 1903 the literary critic Annie Russell Marble had pointed to a modern society in which sight reigned and surface impressions satisfied “the eyes of our understanding.” In her prescient article “The Reign of the Spectacular,” she observed “the commercial demand for all grades of illustrations, from classics to crudities.” She noted that even scholars and orators were called upon to illustrate their lectures with lantern slides. For Marble this general enthusiasm for illustrations explained why even in “homes refined in other ways” parents gave children the Sunday comic supplement for their amusement. Marble linked the demand for comic strips to a broader consumption of images. She hoped that communities “satiated with the spectacular” would return to “nobler standards” and “rebuke mere affluence and gaud.”

But if Daniel Boorstin is to be believed these communities dissipated under the impact of an array of commodities, and new nationwide communities were constituted around their consumption. Boorstin has argued that Rural Free Delivery helped lift rural Americans out of “narrow” communities and put them in “touch with a larger world of persons and events and things.” He notes that Rural Free Delivery led to the consolidation of post offices, which in turn destroyed many small towns and the communities based around them and argues that consumption communities appeared in their place. Boorstin’s use of the term consumption communities retains a connotation of community as a discrete, local entity whose members know and recognize one another. A preferable term is culture of consumption, which removes these intimations of “community” while retaining a sense of consumption as an individual act mediated by internal and external factors. Benjamin Rader argues that sport had a similar role in the early twentieth century. He writes that “sport helped give an identity and common purpose to many neighborhoods, towns, and cities which were otherwise divided by class, race, ethnicity, and religious differences. In a larger, less tangible sense, mass sporting spectacles may have been an aspect of a search for city-wide, regional, or even national communities.” To be sure, Boorstin was not referring to comics. But it is probable that the experience of reading comic strips created a national audience, or audiences, if not a community, drawn together by the visual images of comic strip characters.

Boorstin’s account of consumption communities does not make it clear how they came about. He assigns advertising a central role in their being but is uncertain whether advertisers created or discovered them. In the same paragraph he writes that advertising “aimed at something new—the creation of consumption communities” and that “the advertisement succeeded when it discovered, defined, and persuaded a new community of consumers.” The national spread of comic strips shows that the circulation in rural areas of urban cosmopolitan culture—comprising in part newspapers, catalogs, magazines, and books—created audiences of consumers rather than Boorstin’s consumption communities.

Newspaper owners decided to publish comic strips because their appeal to readers led to higher sales, not because literary-minded citizens with community-based salons requested their publication. Although purchasers did not directly consume comic strips, the strips established their characters as commodities. The popularity of comic strip characters, and the art form as a whole, suggested broader commercial opportunities to a number of entrepreneurs involved in their production. Richard Outcault’s second major comic strip character, Buster Brown, played a key role in the realization of these opportunities and the creation of a culture of consumption around comic strip characters.

COMICS AS COMMODITY AND AGENT OF CHANGE: BUSTER BROWN

A study of the Buster Brown comic strips reveals the amalgam of interests, and techniques, that extended comics’ Modernist vision to the nation. Richard Outcault created Buster Brown after his failure to ensure copyright protection of the Yellow Kid. He intended from the start to license Buster’s likeness to other products. Buster Brown’s physical appearance and manner of dress replicated Victorian representations of childhood innocence. As a visual type he could be described as a Little Lord Fauntleroy. In determining Buster’s depiction Outcault hit on the image of a child familiar to many Americans. Commercial lithographers, such as Currier and Ives, and nineteenth-century periodicals such as Godey’s Lady’s Book, made the innocent child a visual staple in the United States. Moreover the Victorian child appeared on thousands of trade cards, a promotion device used by diverse enterprises such as large-scale manufacturers and small-town dry
goods stores. Onto this Victorian icon Outcault layered comic art’s urban naughty child themes, creating a strip with diverse appeal by combining two visions of childhood. But he did so employing the formal attributes of comic strips—sequential panels, continuing characters, and word balloons.¹⁵

“Buster Brown” first appeared in the *New York Herald* on May 4, 1902.¹⁶ The title character was a young boy from a middle-class family who played practical jokes and was generally mischievous. Buster’s jokes often backfired. Consequently, he resolved at the end of every Sunday strip to improve his ways or at least to learn a lesson from his mistake. The next week he would be back at his old tricks. Outcault repeated this basic premise week after week. The strip’s humor derived in part from Buster’s inability to keep his resolve. The skill with which Outcault told new stories within the basic framework added to the strip’s appeal. The reader had to appreciate the strip’s framework yet repress that knowledge in order to let the story unfold. Those who read the strip regularly understood that Buster’s mischievous side was held in check by his practicality. The repetition of the theme assured readers of the containment of this mischief. Like the Yellow Kid before him, Buster was a distinct character, yet “he” was simply a pen-and-ink drawing. Moreover, Buster’s characteristics, and copyright status, made him a “personality” that could be marketed.

The construction of a “personality” occupied many Americans in the twentieth century. The historian Warren Susman suggested that in fin de siècle America character referred primarily to a person’s internal moral order. Susman saw this vision of self giving way in the first decade of the twentieth century to a fascination with “personality.” Self-help manuals of the era distinguished between character as something one strengthened and personality as something one built. Individuals self-consciously created personalities by “paying attention to others so that they [would] pay attention to you.” Susman argued that both visions of self embodied qualities that could be learned. But the vision of self embodied in personality addressed personal and social needs brought on by the developing mass consumer society. According to Susman, “The social role demanded of all in the new culture of personality was that of performer.” Just as novelists and dramatists created fictional characters, people created their own self-images or “personalities.” The logical extension of the cult of personality, and one that reinforced it, was the creation of movie stars by motion picture studios beginning in 1910. Cultural products, movies, were then marketed through the images and personalities of particular screen players. Susman argued that this led to a new consciousness of personality and a new profession—that of the celebrity—in which any connection between achievement and fame was abandoned. It was possible to be famous merely for being famous.¹⁷

Susman did not provide a detailed account of the historical creation of a “personality-centered” vision of self. Rather, he saw it as an instance of Philip Rieff’s notion that cultural changes alter the types of values that form a person. Susman aimed to show one way in which individuals may have participated in the development of a culture of consumption by creating personalities through leisure activities. To make this point he passed over Rieff’s coda, which notes that because people understood themselves, in part, through historical institutions, “even the ignorants of a culture [were bound] to a great chain of meaning,” making change both slow and difficult.¹⁸

Susman overemphasized the ease and continuity of this transformation of character by overlooking a key part of Rieff’s analysis. The changes in comic art show one part of this metamorphosis. The long-term factors that gave rise to newspaper comic supplements and comic strip characters formed a visual “chain of meaning” that stretched back to broadsheets of the fifteenth century. The development of comic strip characters with their distinct personalities was the way one tradition of visual representation changed with, and helped shape, mass consumer society. Comic strip characters provide historians with examples of “personality” as celebrity or commodity, but they also show how personality and celebrity took shape. Furthermore, comic strip characters, and the celebrity status accorded them, anticipated Hollywood’s creation of movie stars.

Comic strips helped bring a common visual culture to America. In his work on the launching of a commercial culture in New York City, William Taylor has suggested that the success of the Yellow Kid came about through its open-ended humor, which gave the strip “comic significance to those approaching it from different social perspectives.” Elsa Nystrom argues that the initial spread of comic strips reflected an urbanization of American culture, or at least a fascination with the urban experience. She suggests that “people were caught by the brash novelty of the Yellow Kid.”¹⁹ But that strip appeared only in New York City newspapers; its circulation was never national. When newspapers
across the nation began to carry comic strips, artists created works that were less urban in content than the strips that had appeared in New York papers in the late 1890s. They attempted to straddle the urban-rural diversity of American society and embellish their characters with even broader qualities than those needed to appeal to a diverse city audience. By 1903 among the best known and widely distributed strips only “Happy Hooligan” was clearly set in a city. “The Katzenjammer Kids” had a semi-rural setting and eventually moved to a tropical island. Artists set other strips, such as “Buster Brown” and “Sambo and His Funny Noises,” in urban-rural crossroads. Buster Brown, as did his creator, appeared to live in the wealthy semi-rural countryside of Long Island. But the formal attributes of comic strips remained the same. Buster Brown came to rural folk through the medium of comic strip art, which originated in and owed its nature to urban centers.20

The form of these comic strips ultimately may have been more important than their thematic content to the commodification of comic art. But it is necessary to remember that characters are both part of the formal attributes of comic strips and constituent elements of their subject matter. Characters could be removed from their nominal setting in a comic strip and used to market other products. The Yellow Kid craze was just one craze that swept New York City in the 1890s. Others included the “Yachting Craze” of September 1895, brought on by the America’s Cup Challenge between Britain and the USA, and the “boy in adult occupation craze” associated with dime novels. But, unlike these crazes that were briefly subjects of newspaper cartoon satire, the Yellow Kid demonstrated that comic strip art sold newspapers and other products.

Outcault wanted to pursue the commercial opportunities the popularity of a comic strip character offered. After abandoning the Yellow Kid in early 1898, when he discovered he could not control the commercial use of the Kid’s image, Outcault took four years to find another character with the same licensing potential. He drew a number of comic features for the New York World, Judge, and the New York Herald until the latter newspaper published the first episode of “Buster Brown” on May 4, 1902. “Buster Brown” was a departure from Outcault’s previous style. It was drawn in panels and employed word balloons as the prime means of conveying dialogue. But Outcault retained a familiar feature of his earlier work, a placard, to offer aphorisms in the form of Buster’s weekly resolutions.

Frederick Opper’s and Rudolph Dirks’s work in the New York Journal probably inspired Outcault’s new techniques. He also drew some of his theme and artistic style for “Buster Brown” from a series of panel drawings entitled “On the Sidewalks of New York” by Louis M. Glackens, which appeared in the Journal in 1897. The September 26, 1897, episode of Glackens’s series featured a “Bad Boy” confronting a “Good Little Boy” (dressed much as Buster was later dressed) because of the latter’s respectability. A “Little Girl” attempted to dissuade the “Bad Boy.” A text panel within the borders of the illustration speculated that the “Little Girl” may have been motivated by a desire to grow up and marry the “Good Little Boy” for his money. Glackens’s series fell into the school of city kid cartoons pioneered by Michael Angelo Woolf and Richard Outcault, but his use of text within the panel to pose an ethical question and offer alternative readings of the illustration proffered a model for humor with a moral. The trick to this type of humor was to present it in an open-ended fashion so that it had broad appeal.21

One mark of Buster’s personality was the aphoristic resolution at the end of each strip, which became one of the strip’s formal narrative devices. The resolution did not so much close each episode as, through the expectation of Buster breaking his resolve, posit a beginning for the next. Outcault’s resolutions opened “Buster Brown” to alternative readings. For instance, during the 1906-12 campaign against comic strips, Maud Summers, a member of the Playground Association, castigated “Buster Brown” as deceitful, whereas an unsigned editorial in the Christian reform journal Outlook found the strip to have some redeeming qualities, possibly because Outcault occasionally advocated “Christian” business practices.22 The resolution also displayed the artist’s ambiguous concern with the culture he was helping to create. In one resolution Buster stated that “it must be wicked to go to church on Sunday knowing that you’re going to push someone hard for a dollar on Monday.”23 But these sentiments did not stop Outcault from pushing his product before the public for a dollar. Indeed “Buster Brown” may have been so marketable precisely because of this “popular” antibusiness sentiment.24

By 1908 “Buster Brown” was a nationally known name that produced considerable revenue for its owner. For instance, Outcault’s royalties from a Buster Brown stage show alone came to $44,000 between 1903 and mid-1907. Outcault sought to make the most of his success.
In January 1906, tempted by a lucrative offer, he left the New York Herald for Hearst's newspapers. On January 21, 1906, Hearst's New York American published its first episode of "Buster Brown." As in Outcalt's earlier move of the Yellow Kid from the World to the Journal, there was a legal dispute over the copyright of the strip. The outcome left the rights to the comic strip title "Buster Brown" with the New York Herald but gave Outcalt license to draw the characters. A later case established that Outcalt owned all other rights to "Buster Brown." The Herald hired a succession of artists to produce its own version of "Buster Brown." At the American Outcalt overcame the problem of not being able to name his strip "Buster Brown" by drawing his characters in the space normally provided for the title. Buster Brown and his dog Tige were so well known, to comic strip readers at least, that their creator could simply ask "Guess Who?" to have the text and the images act as a title.

In 1908 Buster appeared in twenty-four newspapers across the United States. The aggregate circulation of the papers carrying "Buster Brown" equaled only 3 to 4 percent of the country's total population, but it is probable that each copy of these papers had multiple readers, with perhaps as much as 10 percent of the population exposed to the comic strip weekly (see Table 4 in the appendix). But Buster's audience extended beyond the pages of the comic strip. His creator licensed Buster Brown's image to numerous advertisers.

Richard Outcalt was not the first to use comic art to sell products. In the mid-1890s Knox Hats ran a number of advertisements in Life magazine in the form of two-line gag panels. Other advertisers used celebrity endorsements to sell their wares. Henry Ward Beecher appeared in advertisements for Pears' soap, and Emile Zola pitched Vin Mariani brandy. Life even adopted an earlier comic narrative to point out the benefits of print advertising over billboards. In December 1903 Frederick Opper used a "Happy Hooligan" strip to promote a cast-iron Happy Hooligan toy. But none of these examples involved a concerted effort to use the visual image of a comic strip character to market products. Nor did the Yellow Kid craze, for Outcalt copyrighted the name only after the phenomenon developed. Buster Brown was the first comic strip character licensed in such a fashion that it constituted a brand name. Buster's diverse use distinguished him from other illustrated characters, such as Aunt Jemima, Sunny Jim, and Phoebe Snow, whose images companies established purely as trade-mark figures. Buster's celebrity grew out of multiple representations, whereas Sunny Jim and the others were all tied to single products.

According to Robert Lesser, a comic art and memorabilia collector, Outcalt licensed his character to a wide variety of manufacturers at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. The licensees included the Brown Shoe Company and Robert Ingersoll, the pioneer of inexpensive watches. Ingersoll, looking for new ways to sell watches, struck on the idea of a Buster Brown watch to be given away with a pair of Buster Brown shoes. He was guaranteed a certain number of sales, and the shoe company worked the wholesale price of the watch into the retail price of the shoes. The significance of Ingersoll's marketing scheme was not so much that it used a popular comic strip character to sell a variety of products but that it linked these products in such a fashion that the character constituted a brand name. For instance Ingersoll's first Buster Brown watch carried a direct advertisement for the shoes, but it also acted as an advertisement for the comic strip. Numerous other products—including textiles, harmonicas, a soft drink, coffee, flour, bread, apples, suits, hosiery, and pianos—used Buster Brown as a brand name. Buster Brown dolls, toys, and games, reprints of the comic strip, and the aforementioned touring musical stage show extended the dimensions of Buster's popularity and recognition.

Advertisers who used Buster Brown sought national recognition and distribution for their products. For instance, Ivan Frank & Co., a New York child's clothing wholesaler, distributed a promotional pamphlet that described their audience as extending "from Maine to California." There are examples of children's clothing advertisements featuring Buster Brown from Rhode Island and Washington State, so Frank & Co. probably made good on the claim. The Buster Brown brand name was so successful that Ivan Frank merged his company with an Indianapolis clothing company, and the Chattanooga mill he represented, and formed Buster Brown Textiles Incorporated (see Figure 8). This firm, since bought out by Gerber, still operates as Buster Brown Apparel.

The other major Buster Brown licensee, the Brown Shoe Company of St. Louis, took an advertisement in the World's Fair Bulletin of January 1902 proclaiming the United States the "territory of the Brown Shoe Company" (see Figure 9). The ad featured a map showing the territorial gains of the United States on which photographs of Brown's salesmen were superimposed according to their territory. It positioned
Brown Shoes as a company with a national vision. After it bought the Buster Brown name for its shoes, the company expanded rapidly. Between 1902 and about 1907 the physical plant of the Brown Shoe Company doubled from four to eight factories. To promote its shoes, the company ran a national series of “Buster Brown Outdoor Receptions” featuring a nine-year-old boy dressed to resemble the comic strip character. In 1910 J. H. Sawyer, the advertising manager for the Brown Shoe Company, reported in *Judicious Advertising* that Buster Brown, and the touring show, secured the company effective advertising often without cost. The title of Sawyer’s article, “Buster Brown Advertises Shoes,” gave clear expression to the character’s worth as a trademark.31

“Buster Brown” was an extensively marketed name brand before name brands and trademarks received the full imprimatur of law in 1905. By 1908 the advertising industry was highly conscious of the importance of brand names. An article in *Printers’ Ink* estimated that over 50 percent of that year’s advertising existed to “create property in trade marks.” These trademarks and brand names contributed to the corporate restructuring of American production and distribution. They helped create a national culture of consumption fixated on images. Michael Schudson, an advertising historian, argues that goods and the sharing of their names help make a culture. The point is, What sort of a culture do they make? The introduction of large-scale production impersonalized the manufacture of many goods. The inauguration of brand names and prepackaged goods altered individual exchanges between retailers and customers. Brand names helped determine the purchase of products. Part of what people then shared was the name, the image of the commodity.32

Buster Brown was the crucial link between comic strips and the development of a visual culture of consumption in America. “He” united entertainment and consumer goods. Indeed “Buster Brown” cannot be understood solely as a comic strip. All of his incarnations contributed to the makeup of his character, and each reinforced or advertised the others. Moreover this type of advertising, in the form of entertainment and consumption, allowed Buster’s audience to expand their contact with the character by purchasing one of his products. Readers of the strip no longer had to wait for Sunday to get a dose of “Buster Brown.” For instance, a 1908 advertisement for the Buster Brown doll in the Sears, Roebuck catalog described it as “a very fine imitation of

---


bakery ran concurrent advertisements for Buster Brown Bread. In his 1953 autobiography, *Bad Boy*, the crime writer Jim Thompson, who was reared in Oklahoma City at this time, refers to his Buster Brown blouse as a customarily worn item. In this fashion through the purchase of a “Buster Brown” product, a cultural act, reading comic strips, was further tied to acts of consumption and the basis laid for the wholesale selling of a culture of consumption. Moreover in a city such as Oklahoma City, which grew over 500 percent between 1900 and 1910, the consumption of Buster Brown united the inhabitants not as a local community but as participants in a culture of consumption. At the very least these Oklahomans were Americans because they consumed national products.33

More than a simple use of Buster Brown’s likeness and the techniques of comic art linked comic strips and advertising. Some merchants adopted the maxims expressed in Buster’s/Outcault’s weekly resolution as advertising slogans. For instance in a March 4, 1906, episode from the *American* entitled “Buster Brown: His Snowman,” the resolution read, in part:

How are you to gain your first idea of a man except by his clothes? They are the key to his nature, breeding and taste. Commence at the bath tub, and nice stockings and shoes boys.

A later resolution read:

Clothes are more important than most of us think. What else have you to judge a stranger by? . . . Flashy attire shows vulgarity. Very gaudy clothes are worn by vain, cheap people. Since your clothes are your best advertisement, try to advertise well, then live up to your advertisement. . . . Don’t advertise *All Wool* and then produce cotton. Don’t try to fool ’em. It don’t pay.14

In 1906 Outcault’s Chicago-based advertising agency transferred these sentiments into advertisements for W. B. Hutchinson Co., a Seattle clothing store, and a Los Angeles store. A resolution within the advertisement stated “that if you wish to march along you must be clad in the latest. The better your apparel the swifter will be your progress.”35

In another 1906 strip Outcault expressed his notion of good business practices. The resolution said,

*Business. What a lot of trickery and treachery is done in thy name.
How many so called Christians excuse their meanness by saying*

“Business is Business.” There’s lots better ways of being a good Christian than going to church—one way is being honest and generous in business.36

In a 1913 advertisement for a Providence, Rhode Island, clothing store Outcault’s agency adapted this sentiment to read, “Resolved. That people make their good luck by doing the right thing. We have made ours by giving our patrons the right kind of goods. Square deal always wins. We want to keep our patrons.”37

Outcault’s advertising agency prepared the advertisements, which probably accounts for their shared values with the comic strip resolutions. In these instances Buster, an entertainment celebrity, acted as the spokesman for the company. But he also served as the brand name for many items. The U.S. Copyright Office in the Library of Congress has, by my estimate, over 10,000 individual copyright registrations for advertisements using Buster Brown created by Outcault’s agency.

Buster’s image mediated the reception of the products and gave them a distinctive, if polysemic, “personality.” For instance, it is possible that parents bought Buster Brown shoes for their children out of regard for the Christian business practices and responsibilities Outcault advocated. The recipients of the shoes, by contrast, may have wanted them as a form of identification with Buster’s youthful rebellion. “Buster Brown Plays Cowboy,” published in the *New York Herald* on July 30, 1905, demonstrates the interplay between these two aspects of “Buster Brown.” In his resolution Buster admits to being wrong in “picking out things to do” and then states, “You can’t be happy unless you are good.” But this sentiment is undercut by Tige’s winking comment, “A lot of wise talk from a chap who is always slipping.”38 Outcault also poked fun at the range of “Buster Brown” products in the December 17, 1905, episode of the strip (see Figure 11). But even this episode can be read as a plug for Buster’s trademark, especially with its resolution extolling the joys of giving.

The structure of Buster Brown’s personality made him a figure open to different and simultaneous interpretations that translated into diverse market appeal. Buster showed that a character-based image made a wide range of goods and services attractive to disparate audiences. In addition to containing different motivations for consumption, he united the producers of different types of goods and services, from large-scale manufacturers, such as the Brown Shoe Company, to
small shopkeepers, such as F. E. Ballou of Providence. This unification may have helped to contain tensions produced when localized economies were subjected to national market forces. But more to the point, Buster's diverse usages represent the gradual transformations that took place as a locally oriented producerist society became a centralized consumer society. Hal Barron, a historian of rural America, recently discovered a seemingly paradoxical use of Buster and Tige in a series of antimail-order advertisements run in the Upper Midwest and West in 1916. As Barron notes, Buster was "a paragon of national mass popular culture" and a familiar figure to local communities through the shoes that "were sold only by local retailers and were not available by mail order." In this case Buster Brown literally represented the process of transformation where new cultural forms overlay, interact, and flow out of the culture being displaced.

Inevitably when I mention my work on Buster Brown to Americans, someone will recall having had a pair of Buster Brown shoes as a child. Everyone it seems has a story to tell about a Buster Brown product. Indeed the African American diva Marian Anderson recalled in her autobiography owning a pair of Buster Brown shoes. Perhaps this is not surprising since according to John A. Bush, the president of the Brown Shoe Company in the 1950s, the company had spent $30 million on advertising the shoes by 1959. The ads seem to have been particularly successful. In 1996 the historian Michael Barton could still remember the adaptation of Langston Hughes's poem "All God's Chil-

dren Got Shoes" for a Buster Brown Shoes radio commercial in the 1950s. And it is even now possible to buy Buster Brown clothing for children and Buster Brown Shoes in places such as the Buster Brown Shoe Shop on Philadelphia's South Street.40

My examination of Buster Brown suggests that the culture formed around these products was neither imposed by manufacturers nor created by the populace out of a desire to participate in a democracy of manufactured goods. Rather consumer culture was created in a strug-
gle to assign meaning and values to a variety of products and to lives changing under their impact. Singling out Buster Brown as a representative component in the long transition from a producerist society to a modern culture of consumption points to the multifaceted causality that brought on this change. The modern era was not constituted simply by an increased and universal consumption of goods and services but involved the extension of commodity status to, among other things, ideas and symbols and the development of intellectual property. Comic art was one of the subjects, objects, and agents of this change.

Comic strips not only transformed comic art, by stretching its commodity value but also transformed the culture. The simple, repeatable, easily recognizable form of comic strips made a Modernist aesthetic generally available. By the mid-1910s Americans across the country could open their newspapers and see the same strips. They could also buy an array of products branded with the image of one of the most popular comic strip characters. Ill at ease and hesitant, Americans began to recognize these comic strips and their characters as part of their daily lives. Around such recognitions America became a national culture of consumption.

I have shown that between the 1890s and the 1920s comic strips transformed a particular type of urban imagery into a national commodity. In this process artists and syndicates reshaped the rough-edged humor of the illustrated journals and the early comic strips. Notably artists toned down the ethnic jests and dialogue gags that underpinned many of the early strips. Syndicates tended to limit the distribution of comic strips premised on ethnic humor, such as “Abie the Agent,” to larger cities. Such maneuvers suggest that the sense of an American culture created by comic strips was fragile and open to challenge by humorous depictions of the diversity of that society.

Ethnic humor had a place in American culture but usually as a reference point to some “other” that lay outside the culture’s acceptable norms. Based in cities, with rapidly changing ethnic compositions, illustrated humor journals and early comic strips challenged these norms, expanded the acceptable, and established comic art as both a cultural form and a commodity. The expansion of comic strips from an urban to a national phenomenon revealed the art form’s limitations as transformative agent. For instance, Rudolph Dirks, having shaped the dimensions of comic strips with his “Katzenjammer Kids,” had to move the strip offshore to maintain its anarchistic tendencies and dialect jokes.

Dirk’s relocation of his strip was a technical solution to the difficulty of maintaining the strip’s humor as its readership expanded beyond