

Introducing a humorist is a risky business. One might find oneself trying to outwit a wit. But Mr. Capp doesn't claim to be an authority on humor. He says he is "an authority on nothing, but has opinions on everything." Since this might well serve as a definition of a college president, I feel on safe ground. The only difference I see between us is that I am more modest. He is at least an authority on nothing while I only claim not to be an authority on anything--except, perhaps, Al Capp.

I am an authority on Mr. Capp by reason of having read his history up to 1947 in a book called The Comics by Coulton Waugh. So that you may share my authority I will read you the account:

"The story of Al Capp is a faith-reviving epic. True, he was not a country boy who made good, but he is an art student who made good, something even more startling. He was born in New Haven and studied in the Boston Museum School and at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts. He was going to knock Goya and Turner for a loop.

"One summer, with a friend, he bummed his way around southern Kentucky, struggling with the hideous problem of the fine arts. He was doing a landscape when a hillbilly boy came along.

"'Whatch-a a-doin'?'"

"'Embalming this landscape for posterity.'"

"'That don't make sense.'"

"Capp wondered, really, if it did. At any rate he made a sketch of the country kid. Despite the boy's haunting remark, Capp clung grimly to his purpose and entered the Pennsylvania School of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

"A quote from a promotion article on Capp by his syndicate, United Features, shows, behind its facetiousness, the gratefulness of the big syndicate at the happy turn of events:

"It was at this institution that the great temptation of his life beset him. For a while his closeness to classical art almost drove him to become serious. But that wave of madness eventually passed, and Capp was saved for the funny papers."

"The hillbilly's remark had finally gotten the art student down.

"He was going to take a crack at cartooning. He landed in New York with just \$6, but he didn't have to wash dishes like Li'l Abner; he landed an obscure job with the Associated Press.

"Here he had a fine break, a chance to do 'Mr. Gilfeather,' a nationally syndicated feature. He worked like the devil on it, but a newspaper editor wrote in that the new version of 'Mr. Gilfeather' was 'by far the worst cartoon in the country.' Did our hero simply stiffen his spine when such reactions beset him? No. He threw up the job. There is an honesty about Capp. He felt he wasn't good enough and should learn more, but he did not abandon cartooning; he went back to studying at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

"He sold some cartoons, enough to get married on, but not enough to keep his own Daisy Mae in po'k chops. Once again he made a beachhead landing in New York City, a friendly old landlady in Greenwich Village staking him to a room, carfare, coffee and cakes. Perhaps the sweet old soul had a bit of 'vision-conjurin'' of her own. Odd things began to happen. New York is a wonderful city. Perhaps only in grand old Manhattan could the following almost unbelievable incident take place.

"Capp was pounding the sidewalks, under his arm a package-- a bunch of cartoons, freshly rejected by a syndicate. A man stopped him.

"'I'd like to make a bet with you. I'll bet that what you've got under your arm is rejected cartoons.'

"'I'm not fixed to pay bets,' said Capp, a shade miffed, 'so I'm not making any. But if it makes you feel any better, you're right.' And he walked on.

"'Don't get sore,' the man called.

"Then he offered the hungry Capp \$10. He was no wandering philanthropist, far from it. He was Ham Fisher, one of the big, coming strip artists, and the ten-spot was to pay for finishing a comic page. So Capp got the job, and became his assistant. The assistant's job is one of the two classic ways for a newcomer to break into the game, the other being the staff artist's job, an opening Capp had had his chance at, and failed. Surely this time he would worm his way in. But Capp was too original to be willing to bat in another man's shoes. He threw the job up again. He was determined to possess a feature of his own.

"The trouble was that he couldn't find the right idea. In the isolation of his garret in the Village, he made his mind a receptive blank. Nothing came. Below in the courtyard, a radio spat static and a harsh voice ground out: 'I love mountain music, good old mountain music, played by a real hillbilly band.'

"He loves hillbilly music, huh? Maybe loves hillbillies, too. Maybe lots of Americans love hillbillies--he was on his feet, burrowing

through piles of cartoons, old sketches. He found it, the sketch of the kibitzing mountaineer boy whose remark, 'That don't make sense,' perhaps did make sense. He sat down and began to work on Li'l Abner. He remembered the setting, the other people he had seen and talked to. The Yokum family came tumbling into being. Out came Daisy Mae all in blossom and set to go for her one man. And that was that. United Features had the wit to see the idea at once, for which they were amply repaid. Speak to a 'United' man about Li'l Abner, and watch him sit back and relax.

"Once set with his strip, Capp's inherent drive, initiative and ability pushed the thing rapidly to fame."

Mr. Capp's fame does not rest only on his comic strip, but on other qualities which he is now prepared to demonstrate.