POPEYE

SECOND EDITION

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To E.C. Segar, who created Popeye;
to Max Fleischer, who brought him to the screen;
and to Jack Mercer, who gave the sailor personality
and life with his wonderful vocal characterization

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POPEYE

An Illustrated Cultural History

FRED M. GRANDINETTI

SECOND EDITION

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All opinions in this book are those of the author and do not represent the opinions of anyone else who has been connected with the Popeye character over the years.

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Introduction

Having written a number of articles on the career of Popeye the Sailor and being co-founder of "The International Popeye Fanclub" (also known as the "Official Popeye Fanclub") for more than two decades, I'm often asked why the sailor has endured for 75 years. I had notions, but the answer came into focus after I had mailed a Popeye doll to "The Children's Room," a hospice for the terminally ill located in Waltham, Massachusetts, in 1993. Though the doll was in great shape, I didn't think much of it because I had found another with Popeye's pipe intact.

Several weeks later I received a call from the woman who ran the hospice, and she told me that the children were going up to the Popeye doll and hugging it for strength. I was surprised that the doll was providing such comfort, but then I recalled incidents in the newspaper comic strip and the animated cartoons where Popeye would often assist people in trying times or offer words of comfort without asking for a reward. I realized, throughout Popeye's career in all types of media, he has not only entertained millions through his humorous adventures but also inspired many with his values and beliefs. In fact, "The Popeye Club Creed" from the 1930s stated that to join, you must be a good citizen to your city, state and country, obey your parents and teachers, lend a hand to young and old when they need help and tell the truth even when it hurts.

I believe Popeye has endured because of his values and the inner strength he provides. This book discusses Popeye's career in various media and the people who helped bring him and his crew to life.

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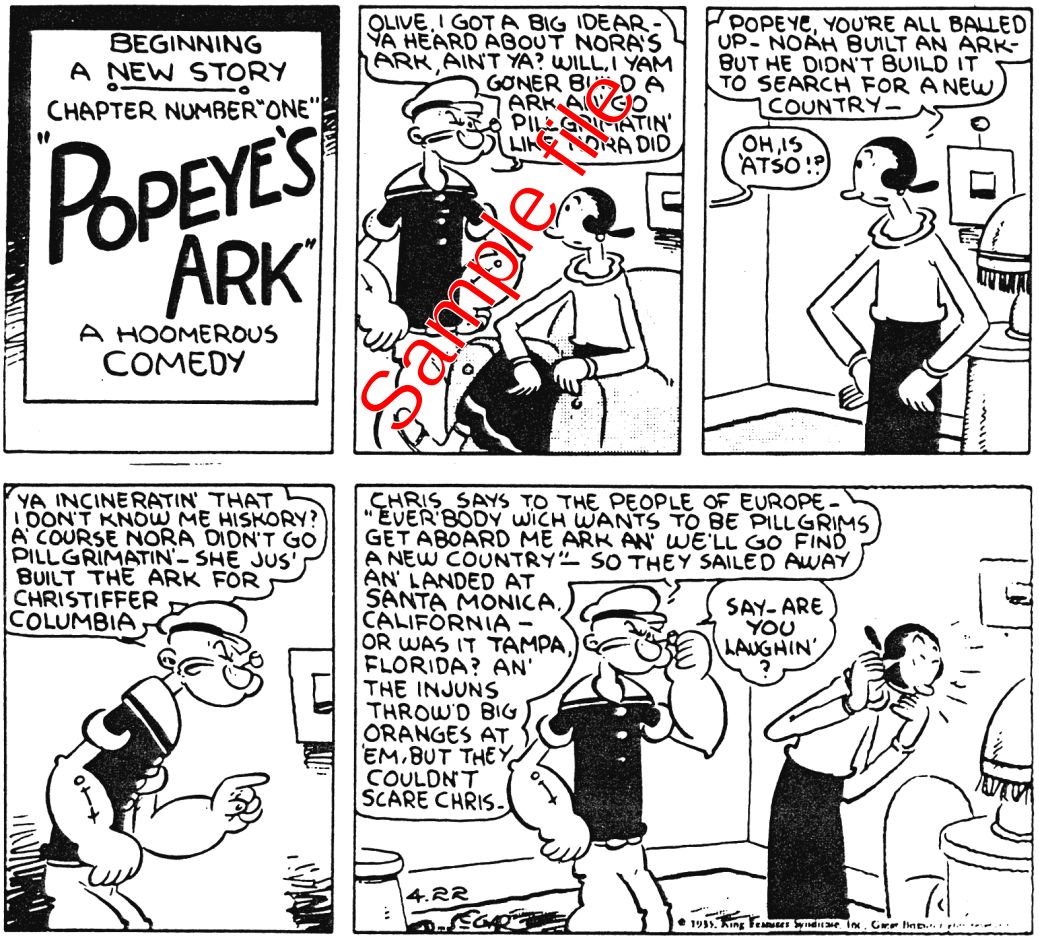
PART ONE

Popeye in Print

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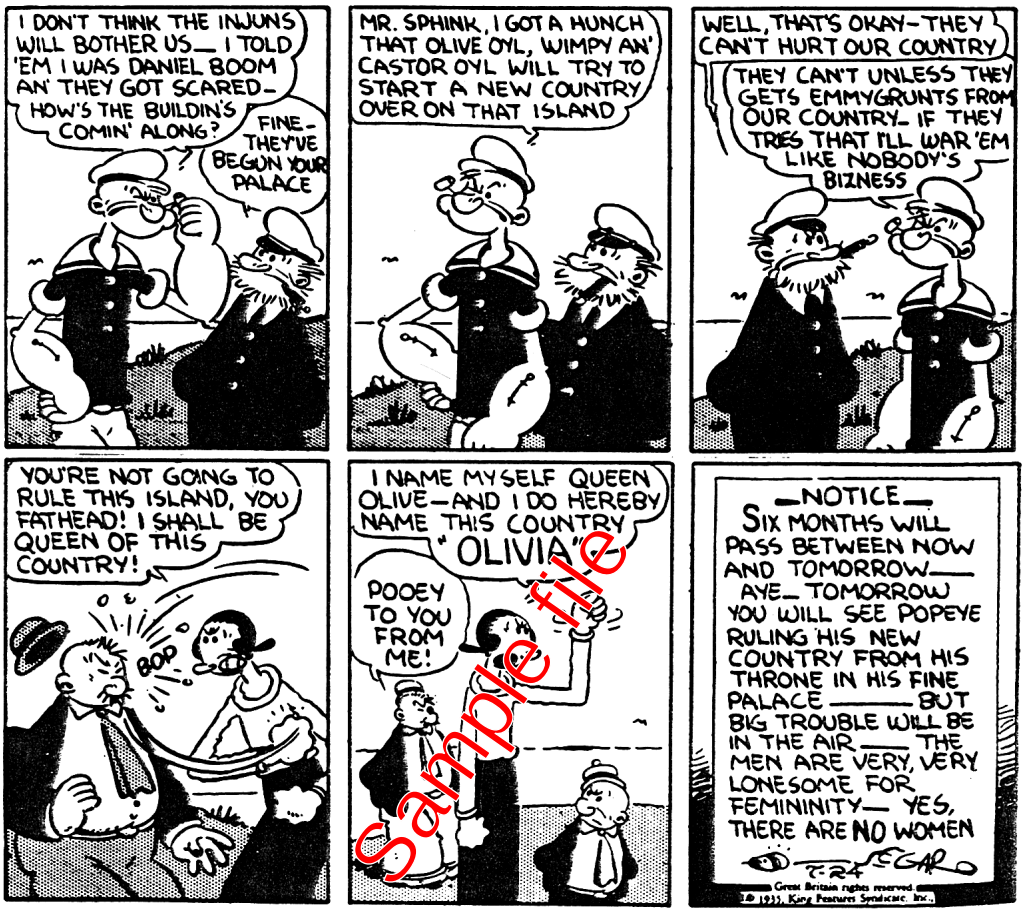
Though most people know Popeye from his adventures in animated films, the spinach-eating sailor actually made his debut in newspaper comic strips. Popeye was created by cartoonist and writer E.C. (Elzie Crisler) Segar. Segar was born and raised in the Mississippi River town of Chester, Illinois. He began his varied apprenticeship in the entertainment industry at the age of 12, working in the Chester Opera House, which featured both movies and live performances. He drew advertisements for slide projection and posters and also played the drum to accompany the movies. After completing an 18-month W.L. Evans correspondence course in cartooning, Segar was certified as a cartoonist. He then took off for Chicago, where he found a job on the *Chicago Herald*.

On March 12, 1916, his first comic strip work appeared in the Sunday funnies when he took over the comic strip antics of Charlie Chaplin in "Charlie Chaplin's Comic Capers." In 1917 he started a strip called "Barry the Boob," fea-



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Segar's "Thimble Theatre" featured stories filled with narrative and humor. Despite his early passing he left behind creations that are now legend.



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Though today Popeye is often thought of as a children's character, Segar's Thimble Theatre strip was written for the adult audience as indicated by this exchange between Olive Oyl and Wimpy.

turing a nutty soldier in the European War. Later Segar began drawing for the *Chicago American*. On June 1, 1918, he began drawing "Looping the Loop," a strip that made comic commentary on movies, plays, exhibitions and other doings in downtown Chicago.

In late 1919 Segar was sent to Hearst's *New York Journal* and began work on "The Thimble Theatre." Initially this strip starred Olive Oyl and her family: Castor Oyl, her pint-sized brother; Cole Oyl, her father; and Olive's boyfriend, pickle-nosed Ham Gravy. Castor and Ham got involved with all sorts of crazy misadventures. On January 17, 1929, Castor was looking for a sailor to run his ship when he ran across an odd-looking, fat-forearmed, pipe-smoking sailor. Castor hailed him: "Hey there, are you a sailor?" The sailor's reply: "'Ja think I'm a cowboy?" With that simple remark, Popeye was born.

Olive was based on Chester, Illinois, resident, Dora Paskel. Ms. Paskel was





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Two early "Braccio Di Ferro" magazines from the 1930s featuring Segar's comic strips in Italian. Popeye continues to be a popular attraction in Italy.

the proprietor of the general store in town. Her physical description certainly matched Olive Oyl! She was tall, lanky and wore her hair rolled tightly in a bun. She also dressed like Miss Oyl, complete with the button-up shoes of the period.

The lore of Chester, Illinois, holds that the character of Popeye was inspired by town resident Frank "Rocky" Fiegel. Lee Huffstutler, herself a Chester local, makes and well supports this argument. According to Huffstutler, Rocky Fiegel was of Polish descent and lived with his mother in a house near the Evergreen Cemetery. Mrs. Huffstutler describes him as "tall, strong, always ready for a fight and always a winner." She once mentioned five local boys who decided to gang up on Rocky and, with all of them involved, win in a fight with him. However, it was not to be. The fight started, five against one, and in short order it was over. Rocky had whipped three of the boys, and the other two couldn't be found anywhere. Once again, Rocky (or Popeye) was the winner even without spinach.

Rocky worked part-time at George Gozney's saloon. When he finished his work and had consumed a couple of beers, he would take a chair outside, seat himself, tilt the chair back, and, with pipe in his mouth, proceed to take a nap in the sunshine. Of course, the sleeping Rocky became an amusing target for the school children who came by. They would creep near, yell loudly, and run. Rocky would awaken with a start and jump out of his chair, arms flailing, ready for a fight. But alas, there would be no opponent. The children would be a block away by that time.



Elzie Crisler Segar, creator of Popeye.

In the March 28, 1947, issue of the *Chester Herald Tribune*, there is an obituary of Mr. Fiegel, who died at his home in Chester on March 24, 1947. Born January 27, 1868, he was 79 years of age at the time of his death.

The editor wrote that Frank "Rocky" Fiegel was a familiar character in Chester and was credited for being the inspiration of Elzie Segar's "Popeye." The article reads: "In his younger days he performed amazing feats of strength. Because of his hardened physique he was affectionately known as "Rocky." His angular jaw and familiar corncob pipe apparently impressed the young Segar.

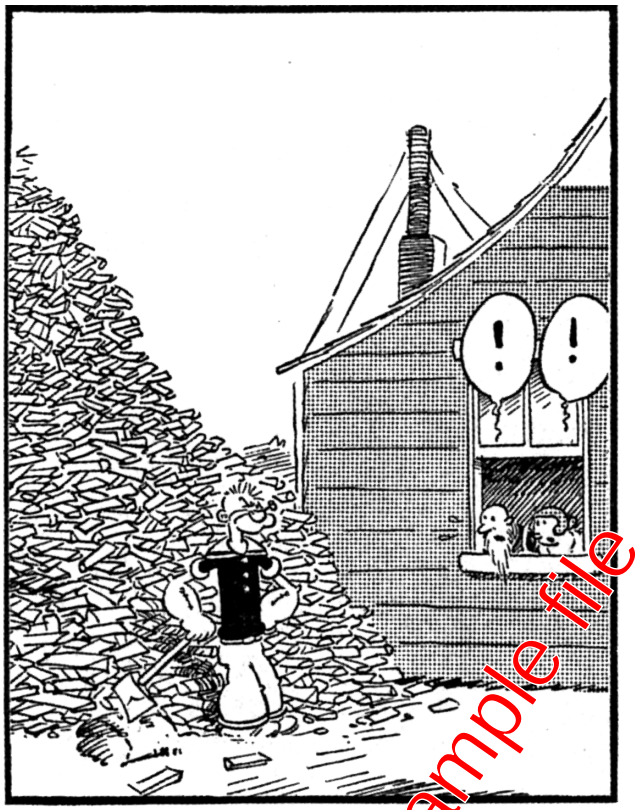
On September 7, 1996, due to the membership of "The International Popeye Fan Club," Fiegel's unmarked grave was given a headstone. The marker was inscripted with the 1929 version of Segar's Popeye. It is the original design of the sailor, which most resembles his real life counterpart.

Segar's "Popeye" in turn impressed the newspaper-reading public with his crude but direct approach to solving a problem, and the sailor became an overnight hit. By 1931 the strip was retitled, "Thimble Theatre … Starring Popeye." Popeye would often perform feats of strength to assist people but never wanted any reward in return. As time passed Segar revealed that spinach was the source of Popeye's strength, but months would pass before Popeye would be seen eating the vegetable. (This was unlike the animated cartoons, where spinach would play a vital part.) Over the next few years Segar introduced several memorable characters to the strip, including J. Wellington Wimpy, the hamburger moocher whose phrase, "I will gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today," is known worldwide; Swee'pea, Popeye's adopted son; Oscar, Popeye's big-nosed, buck-toothed buddy; the Sea Hag, Popeye's first real enemy and the last true witch on earth; Poopdeck Pappy, Popeye's tough-as-nails father; Bluto, whom Popeye first battled in 1932; Alice the Goon, a hairy, hulking monster who later became the family babysitter; Toar, a monstrous brute; and Rough House, the belligerent cafe owner.

The creation of Alice the Goon was so frightening that parents told their misbehaving children that if they didn't watch out, "the Goon will get you." Eugene the Jeep, another Segar creation, was a magical animal from the 4th dimension. If you look in most dictionaries, you will read that the words "goon" and "jeep" are credited to Segar.

Of these popular characters, we can trace the inspiration for only one.

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A page by Segar from a 1930s Popeye Big Little Book. Early collectibles drawn by Segar are worth thousands of dollars today.

Townspeople of Chester largely agree that J. Wellington Wimpy was based on William "Windy Bill" Schuchert, the manager of the Chester Opera House where Segar held his first job. Schuchert was known about town for his pleasant, friendly manner, his fondness for telling tall tales, and, yes, his love of hamburgers. Evidently, even though Segar's "Wimpy" was a bit of a scoundrel, the cartoonist managed to imbue him with some of the characteristics that had made "Windy Bill" a beloved figure in Chester, for Wimpy was always a well-loved member of the Popeye cast.

With remarkable characters like Popeye and Wimpy, it is no wonder that under Segar's pen, "Thimble Theatre" eventually appeared in over 600 newspapers and spawned a Popeye radio show. Popeye and his pals were soon appearing on all kinds of merchandise. Even this early in the history of "Popeye," Segar's memorable creations were beginning what would be a decades-long expansion into every conceivable medium, the better to delight generations of "Popeye" fans.

Successors to Segar

In 1937, E.C. Segar was diagnosed with leukemia. During his remaining year of life, the "Thimble Theatre" strip was often ghosted by both Joe Musial and Doc Winner. (Winner's tenure was longer during Segar's life.) When Segar died in late 1938, Winner continued both the daily and Sunday strip. In the years to follow, Bela Zaboly, Tom Sims, Ralph Stein, Bud Sagendorf, Bobby London and Hy Eisman would continue the adventures of Popeye in strip form. Because each new "Popeye" author or illustrator influenced the strip in his own way, a closer look at these Segar successors makes for a short course in the evolution of the comic strip Popeye.



A "Thimble Theatre" comic strip by Segar during the height of Popeye's popularity.

Doc Winner

Charles "Doc" Winner, who ghosted the "Thimble Theatre" comic strip for periods in 1938, 1939 and the Sunday pages during the 1940s, was an American artist born on December 18, 1885, in Perryville, Pennsylvania. He was barely able to walk on two legs when he took paper and pencil and copied a portrait of a dog, which was woven into a rug, near the family fireplace. His zealous grandmother gave him a nickel for the doodle. Doc later recalled, "I spent the nickel as soon as I could get to the corner candy store, but it influenced my life tremendously. I reasoned that if one could get money for drawing pictures, why work? This wasn't Dad's idea of how to spend my time, but he later was very proud of the cartoons appearing in the papers delivered to his doorstep." Winner began a position with the *Pittsburgh Post*, where he attracted national attention for his editorial cartoons. In 1914, he left the paper to dabble in animation and drew a series of women's cartoons.



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A "Thimble Theatre" strip by Doc Winner, who took over the strip when Segar fell ill in 1937 and continued producing the strip for a time after Segar's death.