

POP POP POP THE POPCORN KID POP POP

A reminiscence by Joseph Cowles



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When Carl Barks discovered I was a Disneyland popcorn boy, his animated smile became even broader. “Keep a record of your experiences,” he told me. “Write down everything you find funny or interesting or upsetting. Maybe we can turn your notes into a story. We’ll throw out whatever doesn’t work, and polish the rest . . .” In a few succinct words, the old maestro gave this young novice sage advice about writing which has served me well throughout a long lifetime.

I mailed a note to Carl, asking him to do a little sketch for me to show my buddies—who were all fans—to prove I’d actually met “The Good Artist.” He replied, “I’ll make a note to do a drawing of the ducks for you when we get back from town. A duck peanut vender, okay? Are you still at Disneyland? Remember to keep a list of the grievances which beset a peanut vender. There may be possibilities there for a Donald story. My error! That should have been a popcorn vender. We hope to pay another visit to Disneyland before long. We have been there twice

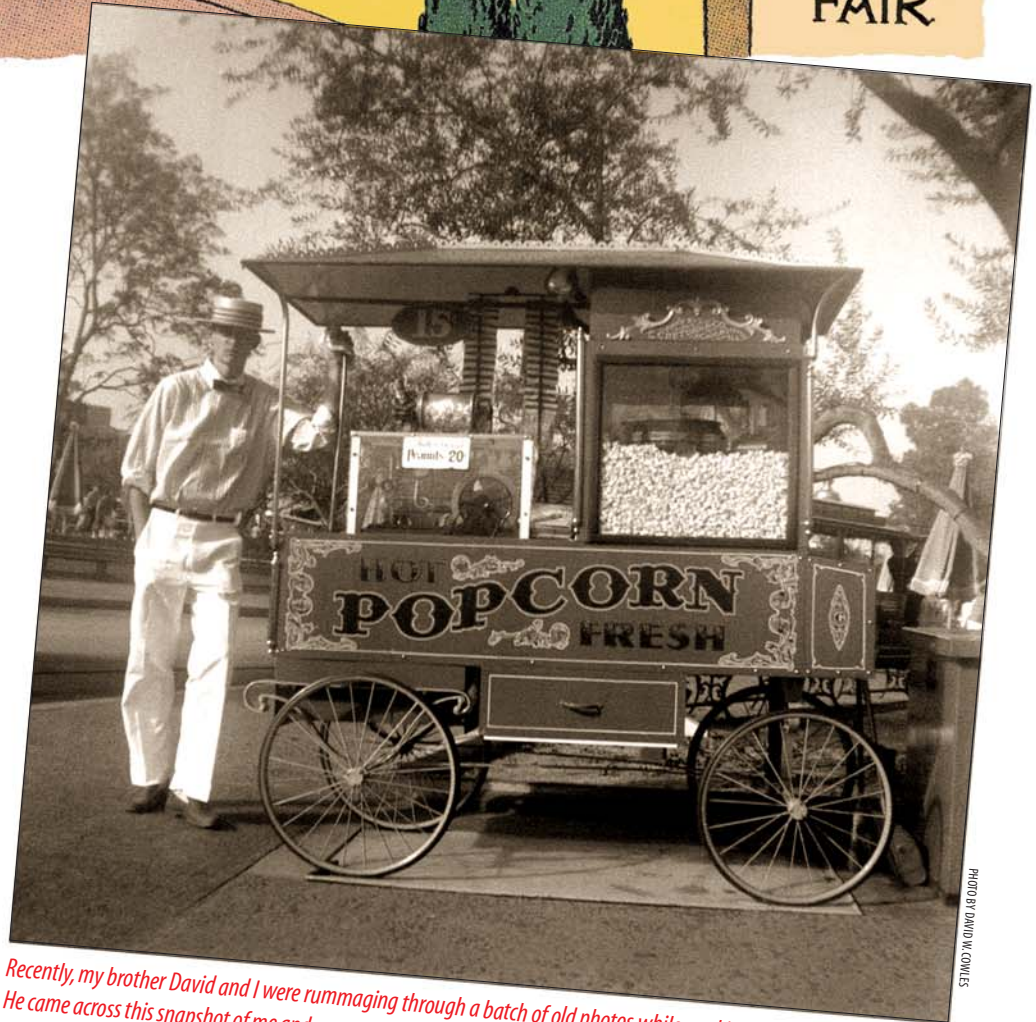
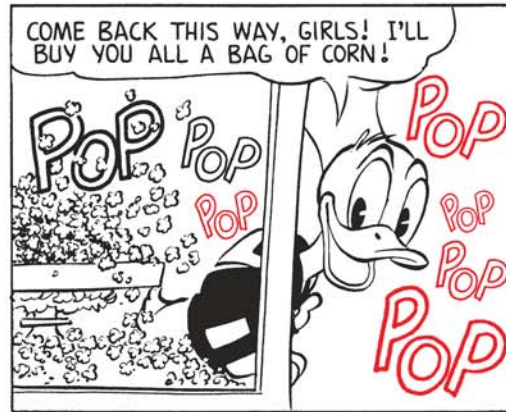


PHOTO © DAVID W. COWLES

Recently, my brother David and I were rummaging through a batch of old photos while working on our family genealogy. He came across this snapshot of me and my venerable popcorn wagon. By the way, that’s a genuine straw hat I’m wearing. (The bow tie’s clip-on, though.) And the trouser size? 28 waist, 32 inseam. Well—that was half a century ago.

POP POP POP



since it opened, and enjoyed ourselves a lot. I'd like to see that popcorn machine. Already scenes of Donald getting the kids' firecrackers mixed up in the popper are coming into focus."

A large manila envelope arrived a couple of days later. Inside was a drawing of me and my popcorn wagon "zooming over the Matterhorn." I was astounded! I thought Carl might whip out a little pencil sketch of some sort. Instead, he drew and inked a large gag panel. I've kept it all these years.

Over the next month I managed to piece together a rambling tale of my misadventures in the Magic Kingdom and sent it to Carl. He didn't critique what I'd written, and I can't recall but two of my ideas that actually made it into the final story. Yet Carl was marvelously encouraging in the way he used my jejune narrative as a springboard for a delightful 10-pager in *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories*.

"We'd better not set the story in Disneyland," he said. "For legal reasons. Anyway, you don't want to upset anyone where you work. Let's have it take place at the Duck-burg World's Fair.

"I can already see Donald turning the Space Needle into a giant spinning wheel, with the Mayor trapped inside."

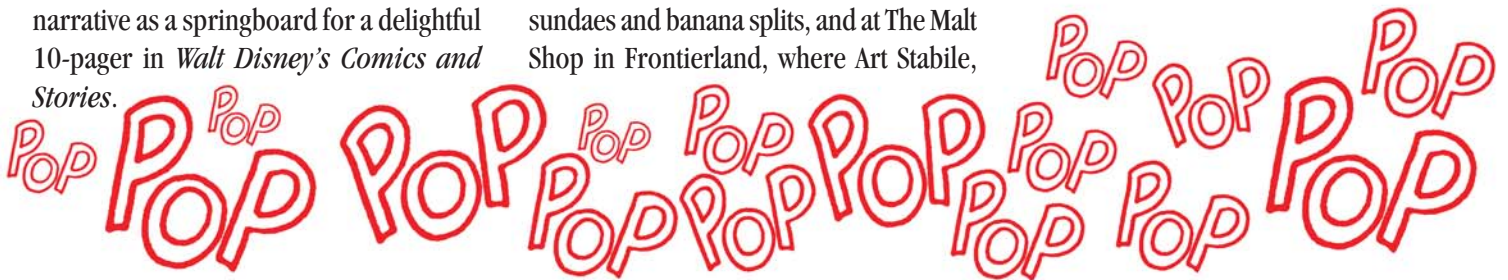
In those days, most fast food eateries at Disneyland were operated by United Paramount Theaters Concessions, "UPT" for short. The big boss of UPT was Frank Stabile, a brilliant manager who seemed to have a sixth sense for knowing whenever anything wasn't working quite right.

In addition to peddling popcorn from a wagon at the end of Main Street—the "Hub" leading to the various "lands" of the Park—I worked at the American Dairy Association's Dairy Bar in Tomorrowland, where I learned to make the *best* hot fudge sundaes and banana splits, and at The Malt Shop in Frontierland, where Art Stabile,

one of Frank's youngsters, taught me the art of grilling *tons* of burgers at a time, over and over and over throughout the midday rush hours. It was a fabulous culinary education for a teenager!

Frank Stabile bore enough resemblance to Walt Disney that Park guests would sometimes ask him for an autograph. It was only natural, therefore, that Donald's "boss" in the story would be "Mr. Stumble."

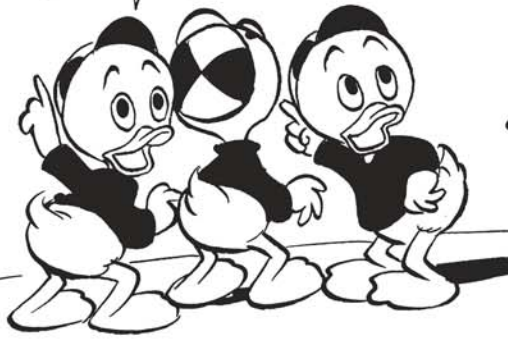
This is one of the two ideas of mine Carl used. The other was "putting too much popcorn in the popcorn wagon's popcorn popper," which actually did happen my first day on the job. Not surprisingly, I was paying too much attention to the girls passing by and not enough to the supervisor showing me how to work the machine, for I overfilled the kettle and made quite a mess of things.





UNCA DONALD, IS THAT THE MOON ROCKET ZOOMING OVER THE MATTERHORN?

NO, BOYS, I'M AFRAID IT'S JOE COWLES WITH TOO MUCH POPCORN IN HIS POPCORN WAGON'S POPCORN POPPER!

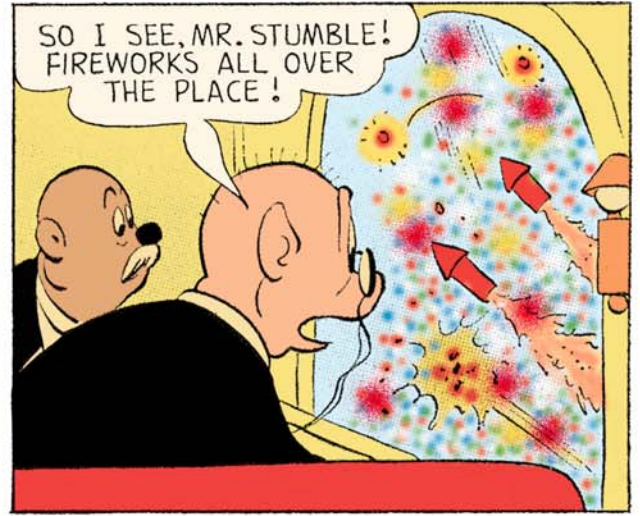


CARL BARKS
WALT DISNEY COMICS
UNCLE SCROOGE COMICS

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signature.
I'll make a note to do a drawing of the ducks for you when we get back from town. A duck peanut vender, okay? Are you still at Disneyland? Remember to keep a list of the grievances which beset a peanut vender. There may be possibilities there for a Donald story. My error! That should have been a popcorn vender. We hope to pay another visit to Disneyland before long. We have been there twice since it opened, and enjoyed ourselves a lot. I'd like to see that popcorn machine. Already scenes of Donald getting the kids' firecrackers mixed up in the paper are coming into focus.
I suppose you've noticed the heinous butcher that took



I didn't create a "false snowstorm," as Donald did in Carl's final version of *The Candy Kid*. Too much popcorn barely pops at all. Rather, it smokes and burns and makes quite a stink. Fortunately, a large trash container was nearby, and I got everything cleaned up before Mr. Stabile came by to check on my popcorn boy capabilities—his sixth sense no doubt tingling on double-time.

"How are you, Cowles?" he would always ask. In the comic book version, Carl has Mr. Stumble saying, "How are you doing, Duck?"

My second batch of popcorn turned out much better than the first, and by the third kettle I'd become a professional in what has to be the world's swiftest example of on-the-job-training.

And unlike Donald, I did not end up hiding out on a dark street in far-off Timbuktu.

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PHOTO BY DAVID M. COWLES

Joe Cowles, Garé and Carl Barks meeting for the first time on a sunny autumn day in Hemet, California, 1960. My brother, Dave, chauffeured me out to the San Jacinto Valley in his new MG sports car for our first visit with the Barkses, and took a batch of color photos during our visit.