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# Another View: Ding Darling, from cartoonist to conservationist

## Another View

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Written by **DAN HUNTER**

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Imagine that every day — seven days a week — your opinions were posted on the front page of The Des Moines Register. And that people were eager to see what you thought and how you expressed it.

That was “Ding” Darling’s experience. For almost 50 years, Ding Darling’s editorial cartoons appeared on the front page of the Register, and 150 other newspapers around the country. He won two Pulitzer Prizes for his cartoons and was an early leader in the conservation and environmental movements.

Although he is in the Iowa Hall of Fame — and his photo is in the Iowa Historical Museum — he is long forgotten by many Iowans.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAN HUNTER, a Des Moines native, is a partner in Hunter Higgs LLC, a Boston consulting firm providing strategic communications, advocacy and planning. Hunter grew up in the Des Moines home where Ding Darling lived for for many years.

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Sam Koltinsky’s new film will remind us. This Tuesday at 7 p.m. is the Iowa premiere of “America’s Darling,” a documentary film of Ding’s life (at the Temple of the Performing Arts in Des Moines).

Ding Darling was a national figure. His cartoons were widely syndicated and he was

influential in launching the environmental conservation movement. He hobnobbed with the leading journalists and writers of the day, and even served in Franklin Roosevelt’s administration promoting conservation.

Hence the film title “America’s Darling.” But, we also need to see Iowa’s Darling.

Ding Darling was a son of the American prairie. He grew up in Sioux City exploring the prairie with its unending sky over waves of prairie grass — a promise of bounty and freedom.

He became a cartoonist almost by accident. As a boy, he found a “Pat and Mike” card illustrating a joke. He sketched it over and over until he could reproduce it. From then on, he carried a sketchbook everywhere. To his religious parents, sketching was frivolous — not

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proper for a minister's son.

He thought he would become a doctor, but Darling fumbled his way through college earning low grades and a reputation for high jinks. He stole the college president's carriage, sang and played mandolin, courted girls and satirized the pious patriarchs of the college with his sketches. (He earned the nickname Ding by dropping the "arl" of his last name to escape detection.)

After college, Darling signed on as a reporter for the Sioux City Journal to earn money for medical school. Sioux City in 1900 was still a frontier town awash with gambling, brawling, prostitution and thievery. Darling spent his days covering crime — watching bodies fished out of the river, covering courts and police.

Assigned to photograph a courtroom attorney, Darling was chased out of the courthouse by the cane-swinging lawyer. Rather than fail the assignment, Darling rummaged through his desk and found a caricature of the lawyer he had sketched. His caricatures quickly became regular features, followed by his editorial cartoons.

Soon, Gardner Cowles, the publisher of the Des Moines Register and Leader, enticed Darling to come to Des Moines by doubling his salary to \$50 per week.

His fame grew. So, five years later, Darling left Des Moines to draw cartoons for the New York Globe in the center of New York City's fierce newspaper competition. Darling was at the top of the hill. His cronies were the leading lights of the day: William Allen White, Edna Ferber and William Jennings Bryan.

But, he left New York and came back to Iowa two years later — homesick for hunting, fishing and the friends he'd left behind. Privately, he conceded that only a fool would walk away from the national stage.

However, the New York Globe had been pressuring him to draw cartoons only in support of the paper's editorial positions. Ding chose freedom of expression. For the rest of his 50-year career his cartoons were his ideas alone. His cartoons provoked, prodded, annoyed, enlightened and amused Iowans (and the rest of the country).

He embodied Iowa values: He worked hard (he drew over 12,000 cartoons in his lifetime), he was an independent thinker and he loved the Iowa land. He was one of the first to sound the alarm about the threats to the Iowa land, its habitats, waterways and wildlife.

When he saw a problem, not only did he speak up, he took action. That is Iowa's darling, the Ding Darling that Iowa should remember.

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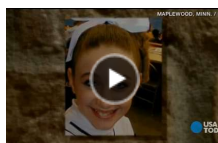
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