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Revisiting the legacy of Iowa's 'Ding' Darling

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Ding Darling

Written by
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"I don't care a straw for your newspaper articles; my constituents don't know how to read, but they can't help seeing them damned pictures."

That's what Tammany Hall machine politician William "Boss" Tweed reportedly said after he and his cronies were caricatured so relentlessly in the 1860s and 1870s by Thomas Nast, the cartoonist for Harper's Weekly.

In the century-and-a-half since the height of Tweed's power, political cartoonists — including multiple-Pulitzer-Prize-winning Iowans such as Jay "Ding" Darling (1876-1962) and Paul Conrad (1924-2010) — have continued to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable with their "damned pictures."

That legacy is on display for the next few weeks as part of the "The Hidden Works of Jay N. 'Ding' Darling" exhibit at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum in West Branch. For more than six decades after starting as a reporter for the Sioux City Journal in 1900, Darling enjoyed an amazing journalistic career in Iowa and New York.

With his Pulitzer Prizes for Editorial Cartooning from 1924 and 1943, Darling has earned a spot on any time line or genealogical chart tracing the history of editorial cartooning from Nash to the shrinking number of top-notch national cartoonists today —

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including Daryl Cagle, R.J. Matson, Patrick Chappatte and Pat Bagley.

If you go

- The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum in West Branch is presenting the exhibit "The Hidden Works of Jay N. 'Ding' Darling" until March 23.
- In conjunction with the exhibit, freelance cartoonist Paul Fell of Nebraska will speak at 2 p.m. Saturday at the presidential museum.
- • Iowa Public Television (www.iptv.org) is scheduled to broadcast the documentary, "America's Darling: The Story of Jay N. 'Ding' Darling," at 6:30 p.m. March 14.

Like Darling before them, today's editorial cartoonists know their job is to bring together otherwise dissimilar events in unexpected ways to make larger political arguments. That effect sometimes produces humor as a by-product, but a cartoonist's main goal isn't to amuse his or her readers; it's to jar their consciences.

In addition to featuring Darling's cartoons, the exhibit — which is open until March 23

— also includes Darling's family and personal objects, sketches and original printing plates from The Des Moines Register. The "hidden works" are those that filmmaker Samuel Koltinsky uncovered while conducting research for his documentary about Darling. Some of those items have never been exhibited before, and much focuses on Darling's other great passion: wildlife conservation.

The exhibit also showcases how Darling enjoyed a clout — not to mention a sense of job security — that few newspaper cartoonists experience today.

Unfortunately, having been saturated with iconoclastic cartoons for nearly two centuries, the American public often is immune to even the sharpest of cartoon wit. Cartoon agency representatives report that political cartoons seldom offend the very people they are directed at. In fact, just when a cartoonist thinks she has skewered a political big wig with her pen, the big wig's people usually call and ask for a copy of the original because the big wig thinks it's "cute."

Darling did draw the occasional "cute" cartoon but not at the expense of making a broader political or social point. And revisiting Darling's work makes us hope that the newspaper industry — however it evolves — will continue to find a way to make space for drawings as powerful and provocative as his were.



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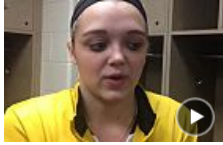
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