

A great cartoonist's tribute to Billy Ireland

. . . Who Is Looking Over My Shoulder



By MILTON CANIFF



In their detached way the obituary pages of the *New York Times* put a measure on people which is usually more lasting than carved stone. When William Addison Ireland of Chillicothe and Columbus, Ohio, died in 1935 the *Times* gave him more space than the president of a famous Eastern college who passed away at about the same time.

How Billy Ireland became such a national figure as the cartoonist for a single newspaper, with no syndication (beyond the frequent international reprinting of his work from the *Columbus Dispatch*) is a tribute to the potent probings of the witty pen of the Ohio boy who once drew chalk pictures on the sidewalks in the home town he never forgot.

I am sorry for the newer generations of Central Ohioans who will never know the thrill of seeing something in Ireland's **PASSING SHOW** page in the *Sunday Dispatch* which instantly crystalized their own thinking. He could portray such a commonplace and familiar item as the

MILTON CANIFF, a native of Hillsboro, is one of the most successful cartoonists in America. His *Steve Canyon* is to millions of followers almost more real than reality itself. He received an Ohioana Career Medal in 1954.

garbage disposal truck-train then in use by the city in such a way as to show it to be positively romantic. He called it the "Hyacinth Express."

Good Advice

Ireland's most telling advice to me came in a phrase about eating—although I never once had a meal with my mentor.

I had appeared in a couple of college plays at Ohio State and I was flattered to receive a call from the manager of the stock company then incumbent at the Hartman Theatre asking if I would be interested in joining a similar organization being formed to appear in another city. I went to the top floor of the *Dispatch* building to consult the master. Bill was able to produce such prodigious amounts of work by setting his cartoon idea at home the night before and doing only the finished drawing in his office downtown. Hence he had time to talk with anyone.

I did not even phone for an appointment, but barged in, as did anyone else on the staff. Ireland always gave his visitors two glances—one of recognition at entrance, the other a warm look with his goodbyes. Between the two he seldom took his eyes from the board.

On this particular day the Santa-like figure was seated as usual on the edge of

the chair, large sheet of paper held to the drawing board by a single thumb tack. His glasses were on the end of his nose and he held the bottle of drawing ink in his left hand as he swiftly stroked in the firm lines, holding the pen quite loosely, far back from the tip (he rarely used a brush).

"Actors Don't Eat Regularly"

I tried never to waste Ireland's time (although he never once rejected me or showed any impatience with my presence). I stated my problem and he said, "Stick to your ink pots, Kid, actors don't eat regularly." Since he had first recommended me for a job five years before, Ireland had never given me a direct order. Although it was couched in terms of counsel, I knew he meant it as sincerely as if it had been a notarized deputation.

Although he gave the sincere impression of enjoying his work, W. A. I. once said to me that he got so sick of grinding out a daily cartoon that he needed to break away frequently. The result of these excursions was always such a delightful graphic travelog in a subsequent *PASSING SHOW* that *Dispatch* readers waited patiently for the return of their drawing-board Pepys. To retain the continuity of the space, the newspaper's management eventually hired Ray Evans, Sr., to *FILL THE GAP* while Ireland was on holiday and sick leave. Evans sublimated his own fine style to that of the man who started so many of us in our profession.

Ray Evans, Jr., now carries on the tradition of the strong editorial drawing presented in the open, homey cartoon style of Billy Ireland which has become a hallmark of the *Dispatch*. Twenty-four

years after his death in 1935 there are a dozen other artists on newspapers around the nation who reflect the influence of the good hand. While I was on the *Dispatch* staff it was a real problem to avoid imitation of so successful a practitioner. Since there was no thought of replacing Ireland I knew I must work up a technique of my own and eventually strike out from Columbus and the comfortable wing of such an inspiring example as Bill.

No Formal Training

Having no formal art training, Ireland experienced his roughest moments when he attempted to draw straight figures. However, he never skirted an idea because the picture included things he found difficult to delineate. He would plow into the problem and make his point, sometimes (as during World War I) when the composition included serious and realistic aspects in addition to the broad comedy which was his forte.

I joined the *Dispatch* staff in 1925 and left in 1932, returning at infrequent intervals until the sad occasion in 1935 when Billy took the last trip to his beloved Ross County.

The sharpness of Billy's wit and the warmth of his good offices linger in such fine focus after all this time that I find it hard to believe he will not be sitting in his room on the top floor of the newspaper's building when I re-visit the place today.

There is only one original drawing on the walls of my studio. It bears no signature, because the artist never actually put his name on the *PASSING SHOW*, but the familiar Shamrock is formed by the curling smoke from a camp fire.

I never forget who is looking over my shoulder as I work.