



American National Memory and Commemoration in Bicentennial-Themed Newspaper Comic Strips

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Yankee Doodles (Ben, Fred & Don): strip published on September 14, 1975

In the United States, the year 1976 was marked by two events: the presidential campaign that resulted in Jimmy Carter's victory over Gerald Ford in November, and, during the summer, the celebration of the Bicentennial, the two-hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

Superficially, the Bicentennial commemorated two centuries of national history rooted in three elements:

- 1776, "year one" of a new political regime breaking with the British colonial order;
- July 4, "Independence Day," the national holiday embodied in a commemorative date;
- the "American Revolution," a process of decolonization that ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1783 and beginning, depending on the perspective adopted, either in 1763 at the end of the Seven Years' War or in 1775 at the start of the War of Independence.

This tripartite definition is primarily functional for historians. For the U.S. citizens of the mid-1970s, the association of the years 1776 and 1976 lent itself to heterogeneous spontaneous articulations of collective memory, depending on whether attention was focused on a specific date, a year, the War of Independence, or even the two centuries that had elapsed.

The Bicentennial corresponded less to the collective memory of the American Revolution than to a present constructed through the convergence of several factors that had profoundly shaped postwar American society:

- the gradual acceleration, since the mid-1950s, of struggles for civil rights of ethnic minorities, women, and sexual minorities;
- the protracted ending of the Vietnam War, which since 1964 had crystallized the emergence of a protest-oriented citizenship among the baby-boomer generation;
- a political life in which partisan divisions had widened between a Republican administration guided by “realist” geopolitical principles and a Democratic opposition in Congress increasingly attentive to human rights issues;
- and, as a culminating factor affecting ordinary citizens, the oil shock of 1973, which heralded the end of the postwar decades of economic prosperity.

From the early 1980s onward, the American historian Alan Brinkley designated this transitional period as the “Age of Limits” (Brinkley 6). This process, however, was not exclusive to the American context: it echoed the cultural dynamic later diagnosed by French historian Pierre Nora when he subjected the concept of *lieux de mémoire* to historical analysis in response to what he defined as “the emergence of a historical sense of the *present*, the painful transition from one model of the *nation* to another, the transformation of lived history into *memory*” (Nora 8; my translation)—a threefold modality that helps explain the construction of the commemorations of 1976 in relation to the set of national memories attached to 1776.

The Bicentennial Commemoration

A century earlier, in 1876, the Centennial had been largely structured around the Philadelphia International Exhibition, the first world’s fair held on American soil (Fig. 1). In a country still experiencing the aftereffects of the Civil War, which had ended eleven years earlier, the Philadelphia Exhibition—conceived as a showcase of the economic and technological dynamism of the United States—attracted more than nine million American and foreign visitors, an impressive achievement for a nation then numbering forty-six million inhabitants. The commemorative spirit implemented in 1876 was perceived by contemporary observers as an almost complete success, despite certain dissonances that went largely unnoticed by the

public at the time, such as the marginalization of African Americans and women in what was intended to be a major collective celebration of American identity (Coste, paragraph 6).



Fig. 1. “Grand United States Centennial Exhibition 1876.” Currier & Ives print (1876).

A century later, in 1976, the Bicentennial took place roughly a decade after the centennial commemorations of the end of the Civil War, organized in 1965 under the Lyndon B. Johnson presidency. These had been marked, in domestic policy, by civil rights reform and the “Great Society,” and, in foreign policy, by interventionism in Vietnam, against the backdrop of the restoration of a fundamentally unequal system of military conscription. The central paradox of the 1965 commemorations lay in the fact that, by emphasizing “reconciliation” between North and South, they combined national unity and patriotism to memorialize what had been a devastating civil war conducted in the name of insurmountable political, economic, and social divergences between free and slave states.

By the mid-1970s, however, the country was once again entering a period of questioning regarding the national model of consumer society constructed around the socio-economic supremacy of the white middle class (Bodnar, 206–226). At the turn of the new decade, the centrifugal forces undermining the idea of America as a society of consensus had intensified. A revealing symptom of the transformations underway was the failure of federal oversight of the Bicentennial: the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission (ARBC), created by President Johnson in 1966, was dissolved in 1973; it was undermined, from the right, by the Nixon administration’s lack of budgetary enthusiasm, and, from the left, by criticisms

concerning Republican control of the commission. It was succeeded in 1974 by the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration (ARBA), a more flexible structure, still led by Republicans but endowed with an advisory council incorporating twenty-five personalities representing the diversity of American society (e.g., Maya Angelou, Betty Shabazz, Lady Bird Johnson, Alex Haley, James Michener). President Gerald Ford appointed as head of the ARBA John W. Warner, former Secretary of the Navy under Nixon. Under his leadership, the ARBA abandoned large-scale national commemorative projects were abandoned in favor of local initiatives. These were intended to be officially recognized by the stylized Bicentennial logo (a white five-pointed star forming the center of a spiral composed of five red-white-and-blue ribbon bands) (Fig. 2), designed to disseminate the image of citizen participation in the celebration of national unity (Bodnar 227). It should be added that the use of this logo for promotional and advertising purposes was all the more encouraged by the ARBA as it was subject to fees ranging from 4 to 15 percent of the revenues thus generated.



Fig. 2. Cover of *Official Symbol of The American Revolution Bicentennial: Guidelines for Authorized Usage; Official Graphics Standards Manual* (Washington, D.C.: A.R.B.A., 1974).

Like the printed press a century earlier, television contributed to bringing together the American public around a Bicentennial staged through elements of the traditional national narrative rather than through the divisive current events of the Age of Limits. As Christopher Capozzola has summarized, “There was uniformity, to be sure, but not conformity: the Bicentennial fostered the expression of multiple local attachments and filtered them through a mass-media extravaganza that did not so much repress the discordant elements of the day as it did harmonize them into a nonthreatening national spectacle, one that allowed Americans to feel connected and detached at the same time.” (Capozzola 44)



Fig. 3. Collection of Bicentennial popular culture memorabilia (unknown source).

As early as September 1975, an article published in *TIME* magazine analyzed the ambient commemorative kitsch (Fig. 3), which over the subsequent months came to resemble a vast outpouring of mass culture in “stars-and-stripes” mode (Yeoman Lowbrow), both in advertising campaigns for banks, coffee, ice cream, and so forth, and in the products of manufacturers of various trinkets and gadgets bearing the Bicentennial logo—plates, glasses, toys, ties, T-shirts, toilet seats, and so on... the list was endless (“San Diego prepares”). These objects and the marketing strategies that underpinned them demonstrated, if proof were needed, the extent to which the enterprise of national memory was intimately linked to the spirit of consumerism and capitalism (Schuessler).

Comics in the Age of the Bicentennial

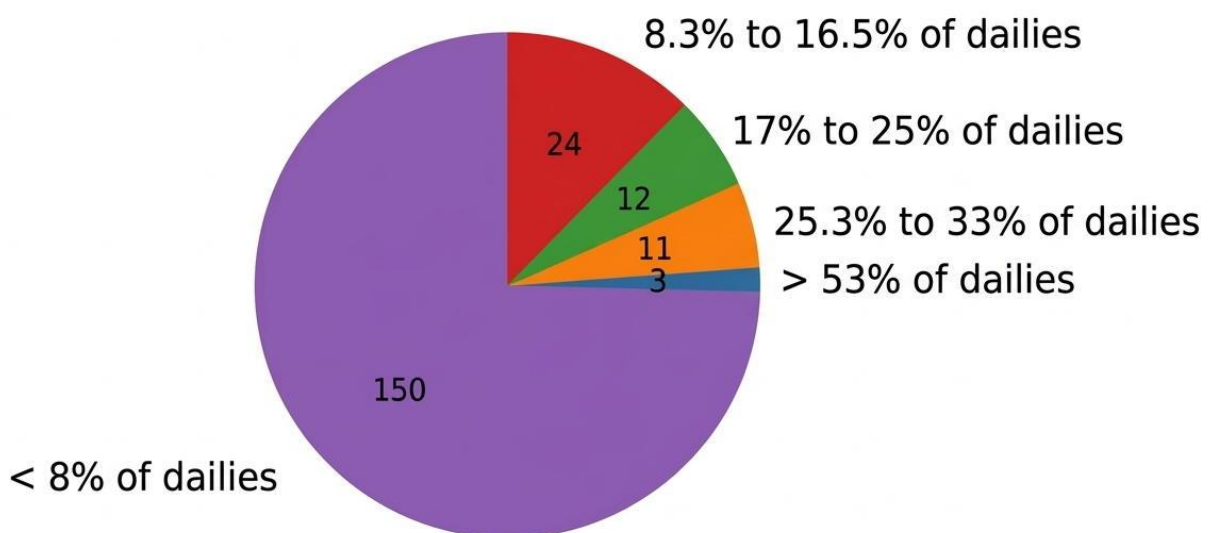
In 1976, the comics medium existed in three forms: newspaper comics, embodied in editorial cartoons and daily comic strips; a sector of general-audience periodicals sold at newsstands, namely comic books; and, for less than a decade, “underground comix,” countercultural comics aimed at adult readers. This paper will focus on newspaper comic strips.



Fig. 4. Left: front page of the July 4, 1976 *Sunday Oklahoman* comics section; right: inside page of the July 4, 1976 *Philadelphia Sunday Bulletin* comics section.

The daily press constituted an almost inexhaustible reservoir of content (advertisements, cartoons) deploying the Bicentennial in every possible form and contributing to the commemorative kitsch previously discussed. Coincidentally, the National Cartoonists' Society celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 1976: the booklet it published in connection with the lavish gala dinner held in New York at the Plaza Hotel on April 19 was adorned with several ARBA logos and contained several Bicentennial-themed drawings (Miller). Press cartoonists, whose profession placed them in direct engagement with current events, were numerous in producing drawings related to the commemoration. Moreover, the fact that July 4 was a Sunday enabled many comic strip authors to devote their Sunday page to the anniversary of Independence, which had not been the case during the Sesquicentennial, on Sunday, July 4, 1926 (Fig. 4).

The economic landscape of newspaper comics is difficult to reconstruct with accuracy. Drawing on 1978 data, one can reasonably assert that in 1976 there were 1,760 daily newspapers published across the United States, virtually all of which carried comics. The notable exceptions were two titles that had long avoided the daily press's traditional self-presentation as a "family medium": the traditionally highbrow *New York Times* and the business-oriented *Wall Street Journal*. (Nystrom 2). The average newspaper format at the time was 36 × 58 cm. Newspapers could draw from a pool of approximately 200 comic strips of varying notoriety, the majority of which were distributed by fewer than ten syndicates.



Source : "Jeffrey Lindenblatt's Paper Trends: The Three Hundred for 1978 — The Rankings."
Stripper's Guide 11 décembre 2019.
<https://strippersguide.blogspot.com/2019/12/jeffrey-lindenblatts-paper-trends-three.html>

Fig. 5. Distribution of newspaper comic strips by circulation (1978 figures).

The market of newspaper comics was extremely competitive (Fig. 5). Out of two hundred features, the top three (*Peanuts*, *Blondie*, *Beetle Bailey*) appeared in more than 53% of dailies; 11 were found in 25.3% to 33%; 12 in 15% to 25%; the next 24 in 8.3% to 16.5%. The rest, about 150 strips, appeared in less than 8% of dailies.

A few comic strips created specifically for the Bicentennial appeared earlier in the decade, but they met with varying degrees of success in a crowded newspaper market where the supply of daily strips was quite high for the existing demand. Joe Escourido's *The Colonials* (renamed *Colonial Capers* during 1973), launched on November 30, 1970, and canceled in 1975, had vanished by July 4, 1976 (Holtz "Obscurity of the Day: The Colonials"). The same was true for Bill Rechin's *Pluribus* (1971–1973) (Holtz "Obscurity of the Day: Pluribus") and Winslow Mortimer's *Obadiah Fry* (1971–1975 or 1976) (Holtz "Obscurity of the Day: Obadiah Fry"). Only *Yankee Doodles* (1973–1977) by Ben, Fred & Don (Holtz "Obscurity of the Day: Yankee

Doodles”), and Richard Lynn’s *The Sons of Liberty* (January 6, 1975 – July 4, 1976) (Holtz “News of Yore 1975”) still ran on the day of the Bicentennial, albeit only in a limited number of newspapers. These series were topical “one-offs” which, at best, were never intended to last beyond 1976.

In 1975, African American cartoonist Morrie Turner—creator of the daily strip *Wee Pals* (the only one at the time to feature both Black and White children as recurrent protagonists)—published a hundred-page paperback with Signet titled *Happy Birthday, America!*. This volume collected cartoons and four-panel strips touching on both the Bicentennial and United States history. However, this move—a comic strip artist producing a dedicated thematic collection—remained an isolated case.

I have identified fifty-three comic strips published on July 4, 1976 that explicitly reference the commemoration of the United States Bicentennial (Fig. 6). Although it may not be exhaustive, this corpus certainly includes the majority of Sunday pages devoted to the Bicentennial on that day. In the following part of the paper, I will propose a categorization of the uses of American national memory in these comic strips in the context of the Bicentennial celebration.

Commemorative festivities as metonymic of national memory (21 strips ≈ 39.5%)			
Archie Blondie Boomer Catfish Charmers	Conchy Dennis the Menace Dick Tracy Dooley's World Family Circus	Gasoline Alley The Good Old Days Little Iodine The Little Woman The Lockhorns	Marmaduke Miss Peach Our Boarding House Scroogie Wizard of Id Winky Ryatt
Mobilization of memorial imagery (13 strips = 24.5%)			
Alley Oop B.C. Berry's World	Bugs Bunny Dunagin's People Frank and Ernest	Gordo Ripley's Believe It or Not! Short Ribs	Wee Pals Yankee Doodles Ziggy Zoonies
Celebration of American identity (10 strips ≈ 19%)			
Beetle Bailey Broom-Hilda	Captain Easy The Jackson Twins	Kelly & Duke Kerry Drake Out Our Way The Willets	Rick O'Shay Steve Canyon Tiger
Dissent (9 strips ≈ 17%)			
Don Q Doonesbury Eek & Meek	Feiffer Friends and Romans	Funky Winkerbean the small society	Tumbleweeds Wordsmith

Fig. 6a. Categorizing the uses of U.S. national memory in 53 Sunday newspaper strips dated July 4, 1976 comprising explicit references to the commemoration of the United States Bicentennial.

Percentage of U.S. daily newspapers	Comic strip titles featuring the Bicentennial on July 4, 1976		
> 50%	<i>Beetle Bailey</i>	<i>Blondie</i>	
30% - 26%	<i>B.C.</i> <i>Dennis the Menace</i>	<i>Doonesbury</i> <i>Frank and Ernest</i>	<i>Wizard of Id</i>
21% - 15%	<i>Alley Oop</i> <i>Archie</i> <i>Berry's World</i>	<i>Bugs Bunny</i> <i>Dick Tracy</i> <i>Eek & Meek</i>	<i>Family Circus</i> <i>Our Boarding House</i> <i>Short Ribs</i> <i>Steve Canyon</i>
14.5% - 12%	<i>Captain Easy</i> <i>Funky</i> <i>Winkerbean</i>	<i>Gasoline Alley</i> <i>Marmaduke</i>	<i>Tiger</i> <i>Tumbleweeds</i>
9,5% - 7%	<i>Broom Hilda</i> <i>Dunagin's People</i>	<i>Kerry Drake</i> <i>the small society</i>	
6,5% - 4%	<i>Charmers</i> <i>Jackson Twins</i> <i>Lockhorns</i>	<i>Miss Peach</i> <i>Rick O'Shay</i> <i>Ripley's Believe It or Not!</i>	<i>Winky Ryatt</i> <i>Ziggy</i>
3% - 1%	<i>Boomer</i> <i>Catfish</i> <i>Don Q</i>	<i>Gordo</i> <i>Kelly</i> <i>Little Woman</i>	<i>Wee Pals</i> <i>Wordsmith</i>
< 1%	<i>Conchy</i> <i>Little Iodine</i>	<i>Friends and Romans</i> <i>Yankee Doodles</i>	<i>The Good Old Days</i> <i>Zoonies</i>

N.B.: *Out our Way* *The Willets* and *Scroogie* do not appear in this table because they were discontinued in 1977. One can reasonably assume that they ran at best in less than 3% of U.S. daily newspapers in 1976.

Fig. 6b. Estimated visibility of the 53 Sunday newspaper strips dated July 4, 1976 comprising explicit references to the commemoration of the United States Bicentennial in the U.S. newspaper market (based on 1978 figures from "Jeffrey Lindenblatt's Paper Trends: The Three Hundred for 1978 — The Rankings," *Stripper's Guide* December 11, 2019).

The No-Show of July 4, 1976: *Peanuts*

It is worth noting that on July 4, 1976 the era's most popular comic strip, Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*, contained no mention of the Bicentennial—instead showing Charlie Brown, Lucy and Linus playing on a beach. This is particularly surprising given that Schulz had drawn several Fourth of July gags since 1960, although not every year. The reason why he chose to steer clear of a national holiday theme in 1976 is unknown.

In contrast, the market was flooded with Bicentennial merchandise featuring the *Peanuts* cast—especially Snoopy. Dozens of tie-ins ranged from collectible stickers in Butternut bread loaves and various commemorative pins to high-end collectibles. For instance, the porcelain maker Schmid released a decorative plate and bell titled "Peanuts '76," featuring Snoopy lounging atop the *Liberty Bell*, while Hallmark produced a line of *Snoopy Bicentennial Seals* for personal correspondence.

Twelve years later, however, Schulz came up with a "Spirit of '76" cartoon with Snoopy, Charlie Brown, and Lucy in connection with *This Is America, Charlie Brown*, an eight-part animated television miniseries on U.S. history that aired from 1988 to 1989 on CBS.

Types of narratives in 1976 newspaper comics

Two major forms of narrative continuity coexisted in newspaper comic strips by the mid-1970s:

- Long-form serialized narratives (such as *Prince Valiant*, *Mary Worth*, *Judge Parker*, *Rip Kirby*, for example) made no reference to the Bicentennial in their Sunday pages, with four exceptions (Fig. 7). Alfred Andriola, in *Kerry Drake*, and Jim Lawrence and Bill Crooks, in *Captain Easy*, each introduced a form of patriotic pause within the ongoing narrative; Chester Gould, in *Dick Tracy*, used the "Crimestoppers Textbook" panel that closed his Sunday pages to nod to the Bicentennial celebration.



Fig. 7. The four long-form serialized narratives that referred to the Bicentennial on July 4, 1976: *Kerry Drake* (Alfred Andriola), *Captain Easy* (Crooks & Lawrence), *Steve Canyon* (Milton Caniff), *Dick Tracy* (Chester Gould).

However, the most interesting case was that of *Steve Canyon*. The strip's creator, Milton Caniff, had been known as a fervent American patriot since the Second World War. Beginning on May 9, he placed his adventurer-detective protagonist within an extended dream sequence whose developments unfolded until Independence Day: transported to early July 1776, Steve Canyon had to thwart the machinations of Loyalists seeking to prevent the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The narrative concluded on July 4 with a remarkable page in which ten images illustrated the combative spirit of Americans over two centuries, accompanied by a prose poem of nearly five hundred words entitled "You Are the Flag" ... and Steve Canyon awoke from his long night on the morning of July 6.

- Alongside these serialized strips, forty-nine "humorous" strips incorporated the national commemoration into their daily installment without difficulty (Fig. 8): indeed, these features relied on narrative mechanisms based on daily gags (*gag-a-day strips*) or, in the particular cases of Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* and Morrie Brickman's *the small society*, day-to-day commentary about American political current events.

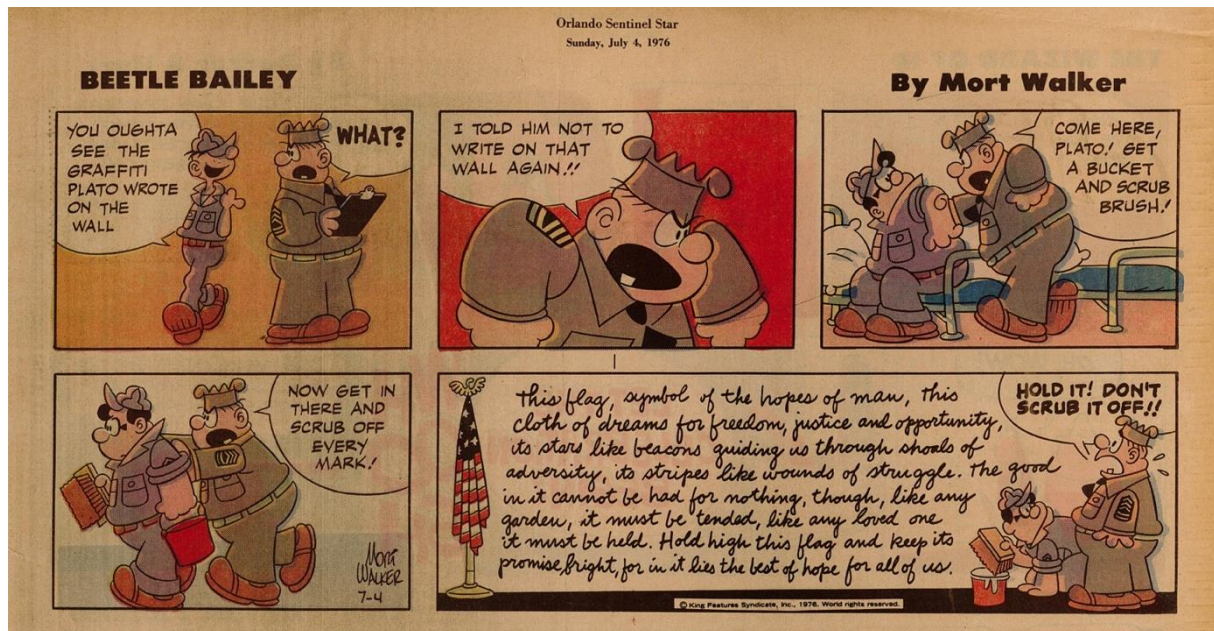


Fig. 8. A typical gag-a-day strip's use of the Bicentennial theme: *Beetle Bailey* (Mort Walker).

Typology of the comic strips' discourses on the Bicentennial

The question of narrative continuity cuts across the explicit and implicit discourses on the Bicentennial articulated in each of the strips published on July 4, 1976. An analysis of these discourses makes it possible to establish a typology comprising four categories.

- The first, comprising twenty-one strips (39.5% of the corpus), presented commemorative festivities as metonymic of national memory. They depicted characters expressing excitement specific to the Bicentennial within the framework of the customary festivities of the national holiday: preparations (*Blondie*, *Marmaduke*, *Tiger*) (Fig. 9); historical reenactments (*Archie*, *Boomer*, *Gasoline Alley*) (Fig. 10); fireworks (*Catfish*, *Conchy*, *Family Circus*, *The Good Old Days*, *Little Iodine*, *The Little Woman*, *Miss Peach*, *Winky Ryatt*, *Wizard of Id*) (Fig. 11); parades (*Charmers*, *Dennis the Menace*) (Fig. 12). Aside from systematic mentions of the Bicentennial, these strips were largely similar to those produced each year for Independence Day.

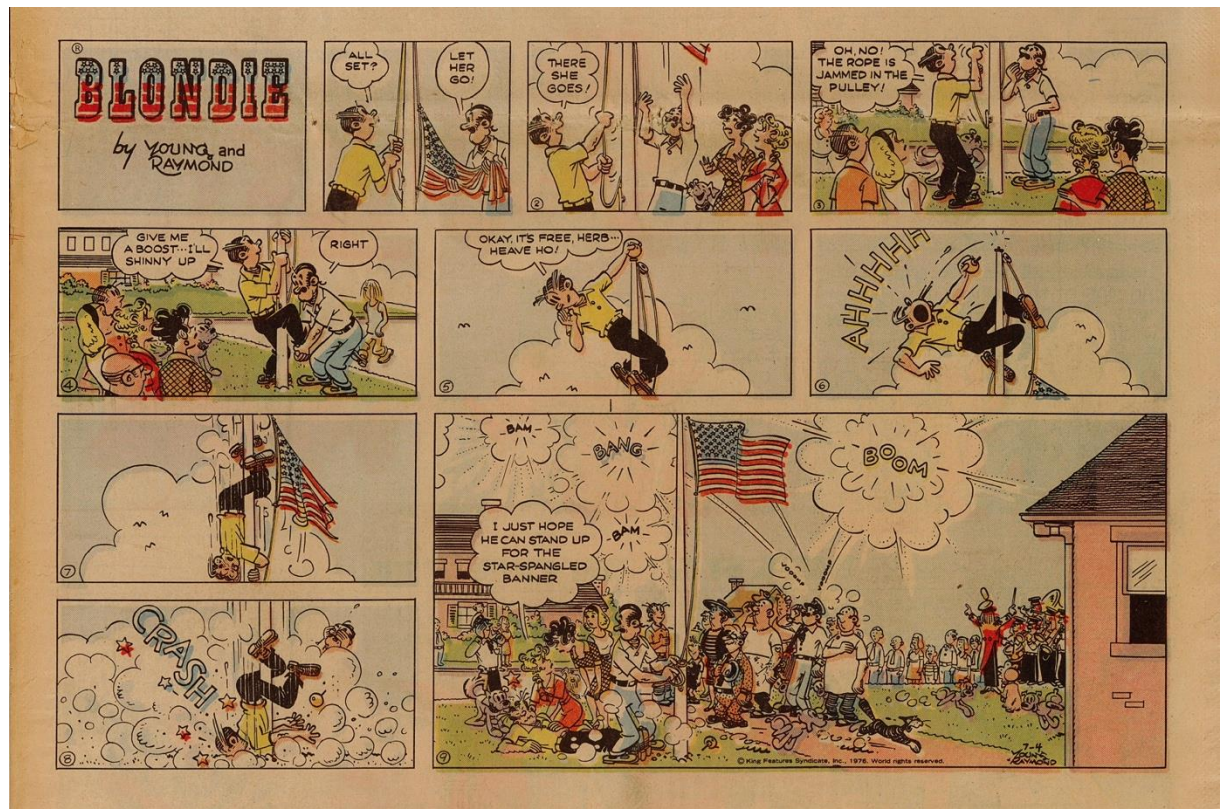


Fig. 9. The Bicentennial as commemorative festivities: *Blondie* (Young and Raymond).



Fig. 10. The Bicentennial celebrated by historical reenactments: *Archie* (Dan DeCarlo).

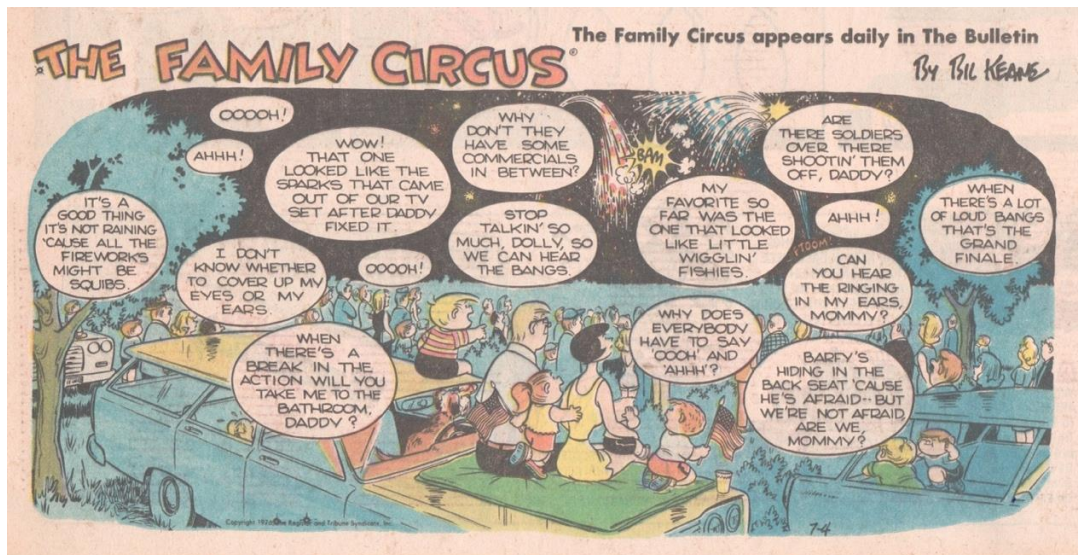


Fig. 11. The centrality of fireworks in the July 4 commemoration: *The Family Circus* (Bil Keane).

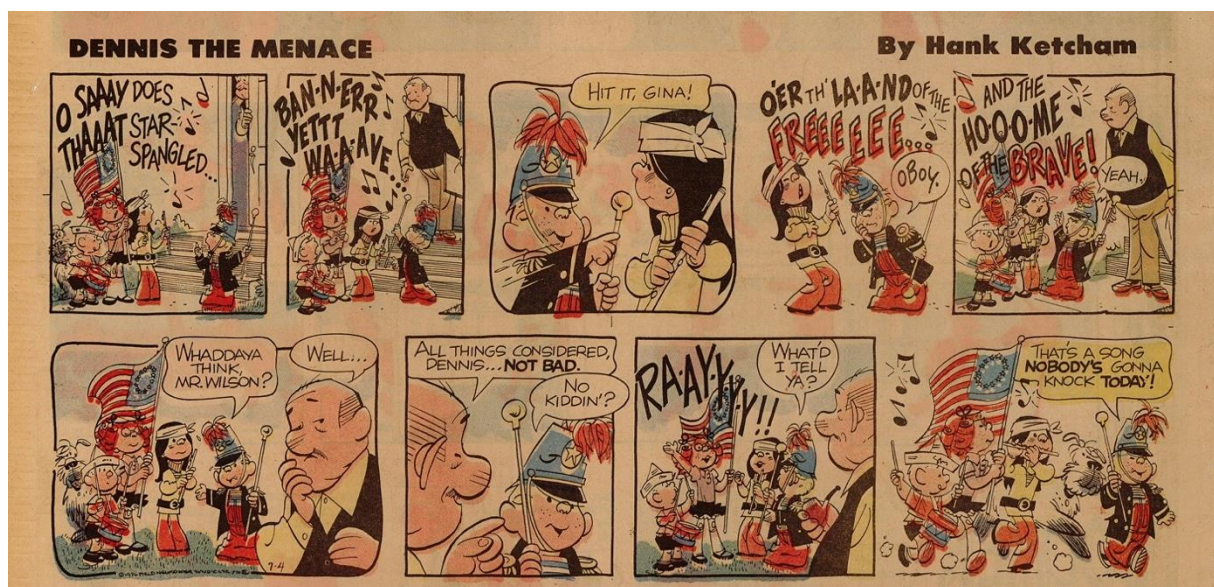


Fig. 12. Parades, another Independence Day tradition: *Dennis the Menace* (Hank Ketcham)

- The second category, comprising thirteen strips (24.5% of the corpus), illustrates the mobilization of memorial imagery. These strips do not depict the habitual Fourth of July festivities but instead engaged humorously with scenes, objects, and images functioning as metonymies of the national holiday: the American flag, represented visually in various ways (*Alley Oop*, *B.C.*, *Beetle Bailey*, *Ziggy*) (Fig. 13); *Berry's World* offered a patchwork of Bicentennial imagery, with a central visual citation of Archibald Willard's famous painting *The Spirit of '76*, also referenced in *Frank and Ernest* (Fig. 14) and, more implicitly, in *Charmers*

and *Dennis the Menace*, where three children appear side by side, respectively as a drummer, a fife player, and a flag bearer; scenes from the War of Independence were revisited in goofy mode in *Dunagin's People* (Paul Revere's ride, April 18, 1775) and *Short Ribs* (the naval battle of Flamborough Head, September 23, 1779) (Fig. 15); the solemn moment of the signing of the Declaration of Independence was reinterpreted in humorous mode in *Bugs Bunny* and *Yankee Doodles* (Fig. 16); didacticism characterized *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* and *Wee Pals*, whose characters were shown visiting a museum devoted to the American flag (Fig. 17). The most original strip in this category was *Gordo* (Fig. 18) in which cartoonist Gus Arriola depicted a friendly encounter between the eagle and the serpent—national symbols of Mexico—swimming across the Rio Grande to wish a happy birthday to the American Eagle.

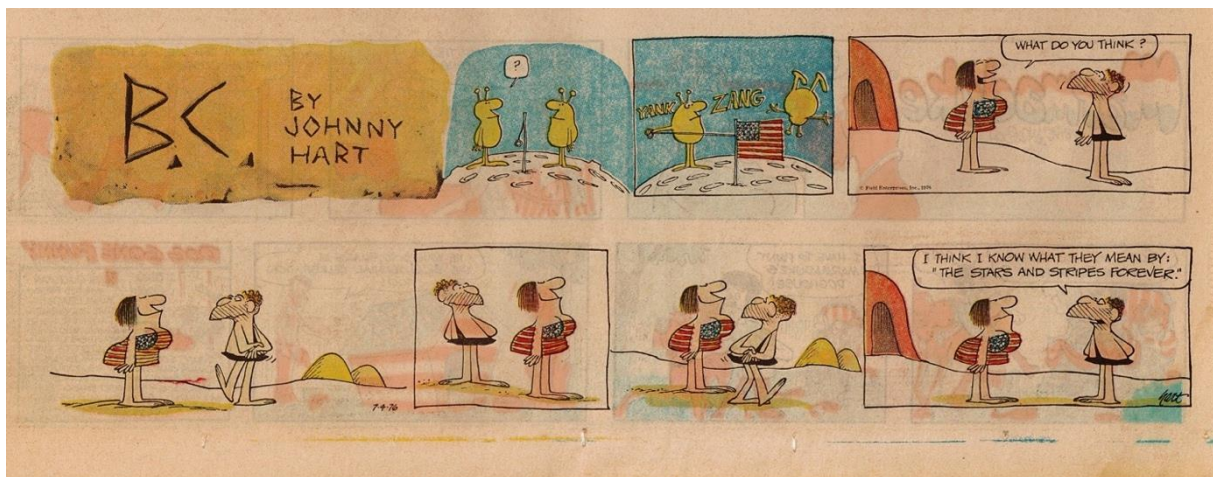


Fig. 13. An irreverent (and sexist) use of the American flag: *B.C.* (Johnny Hart).



Fig. 14. Citations of Archibald Willard's *The Spirit of '76* (1875). Left (top to bottom): *Berry's World* (Jim Berry), *Frank and Ernest* (Lawrence and Thaves).



Fig. 15. Famous scenes of the War of Independence revisited. From left to right: Paul Revere's Ride in *Dunagin's People* (Ralph Dunagin); the naval battle of Flamborough Head in *Short Ribs* (Frank Hill).

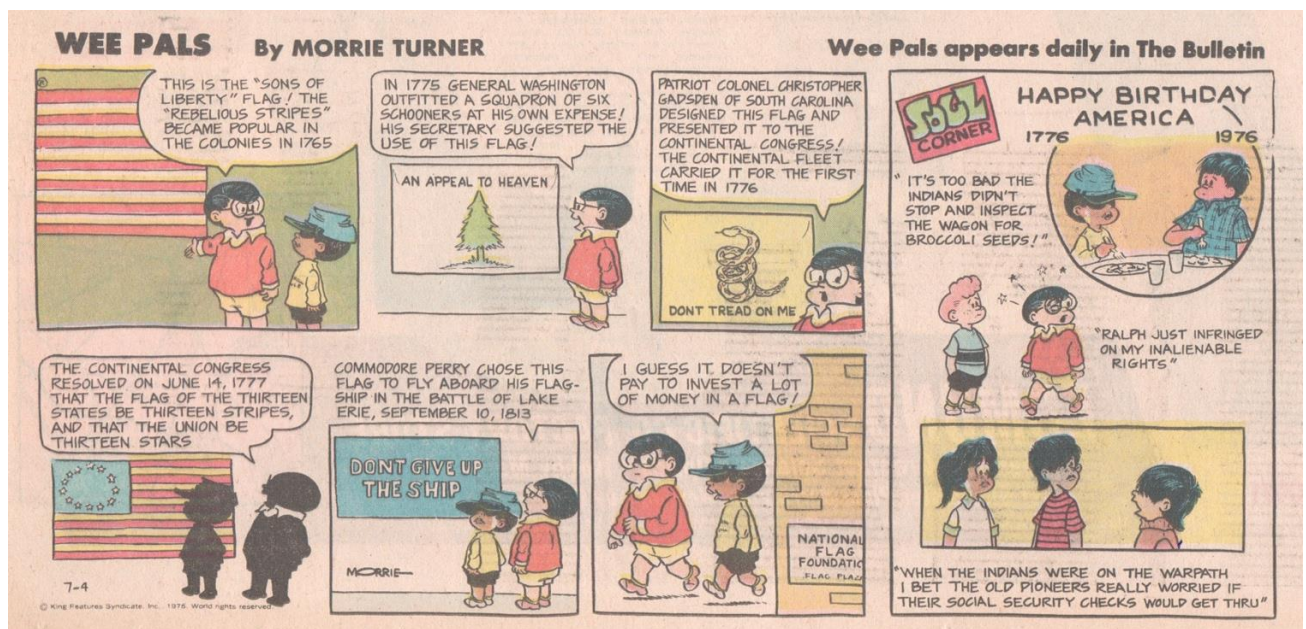
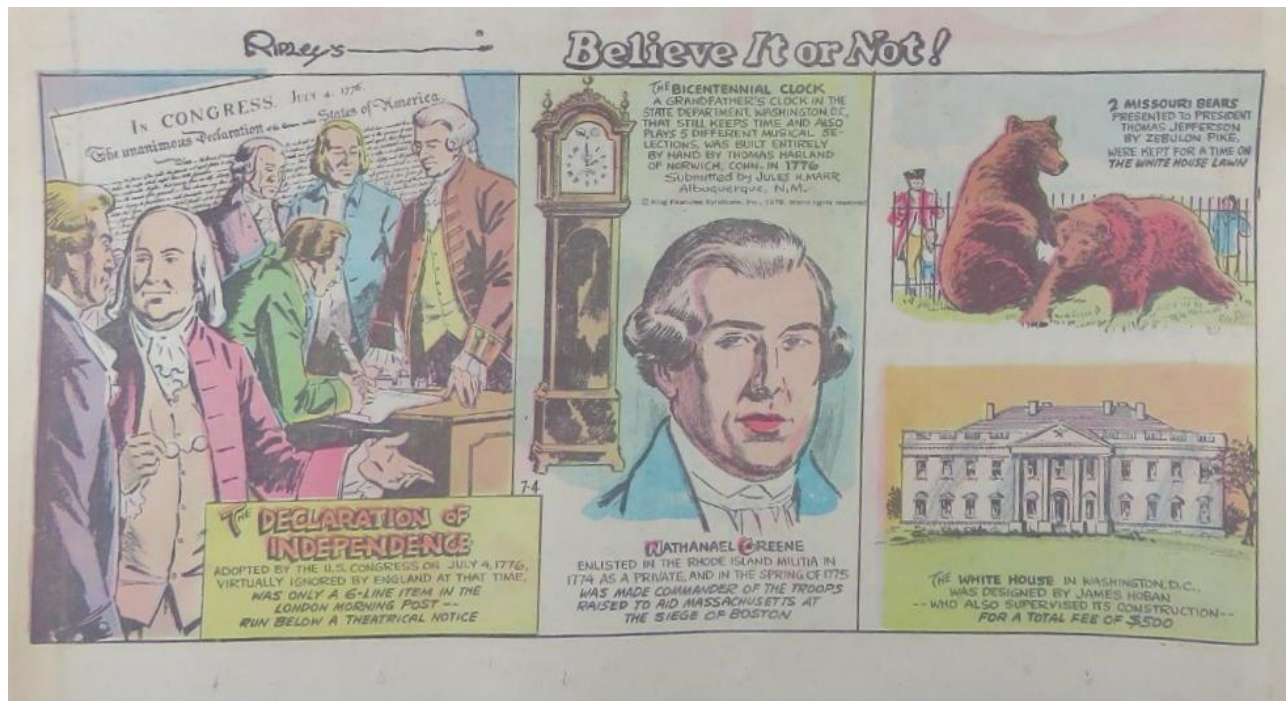


Fig. 17. Didactic strips: *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* (Ripley) and *Wee Pals* (Morrie Turner).

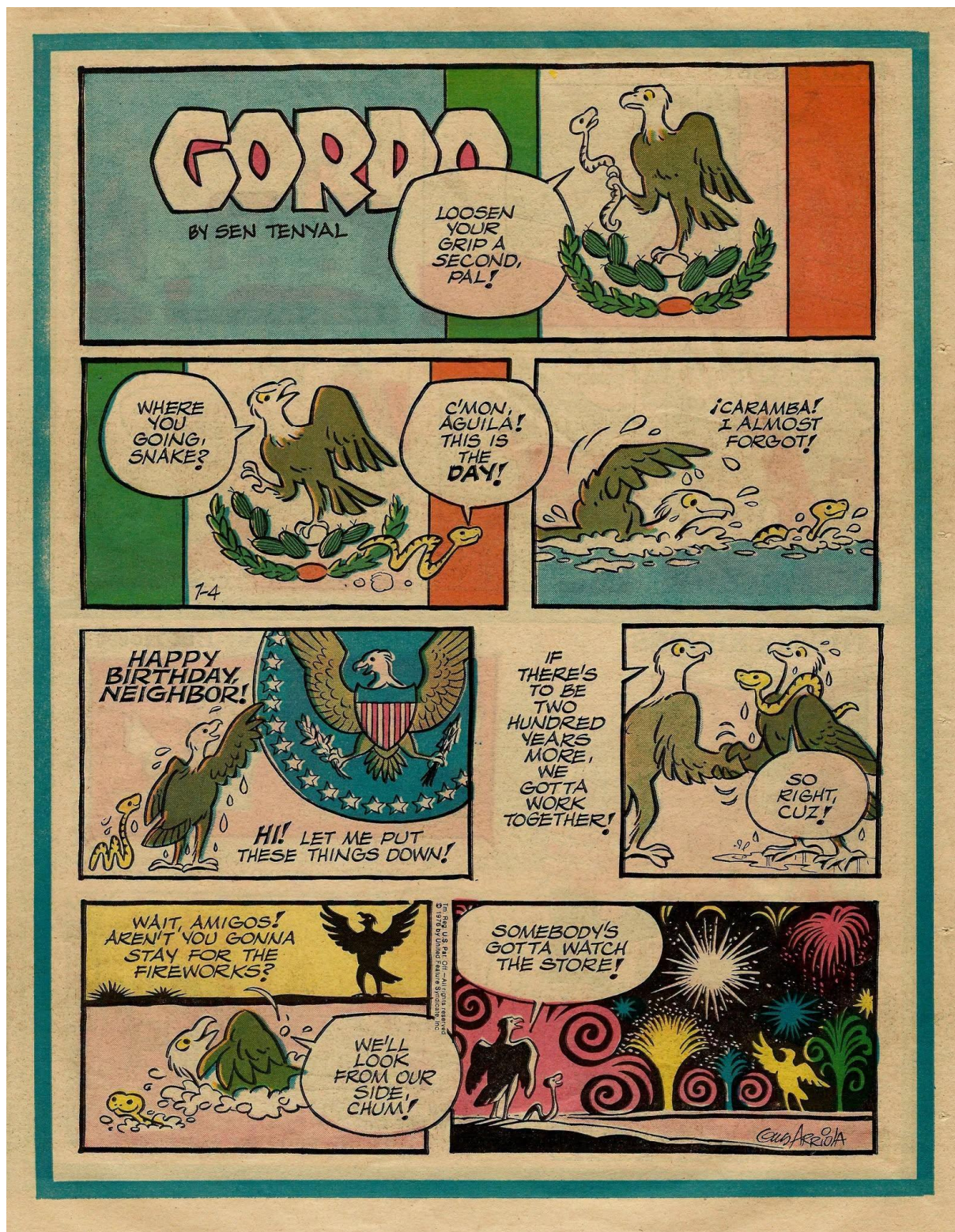


Fig. 18. A rare use of the Bicentennial as an opportunity to celebrate Mexican-American friendship: Gordo (Gus Arriola).

- The third category comprises ten strips (19% of the corpus) that celebrate American identity by means of straightforward patriotic discourse: through the Western imagery in *Rick O'Shay* (in a strip of unusually serious tone for an otherwise humorous series) (Fig. 19); a parody of an aerial geographic documentary (*Captain Easy*) (Fig. 20); talking heads set against the American flag (*Broom-Hilda, Kelly & Duke, Kerry Drake*) (Fig. 21); or the reassertion of intergenerational consensus around American values (*The Jackson Twins, Tiger*) (Fig. 22). And of course, "You Are the Flag," a hymn to the flag and to American identity penned by Milton Caniff, constitutes a vibrant and grandiloquent tribute to civic patriotism, linking the heroic past to the personal responsibility of the modern citizen in securing the nation's future (Fig. 23).



Fig. 19. The Western imagery as a synecdoche of patriotism: *Rick O'Shay* (Stan Lynde).



Fig. 20. A spoof of a geographic documentary: *Captain Easy* (Crooks & Lawrence).

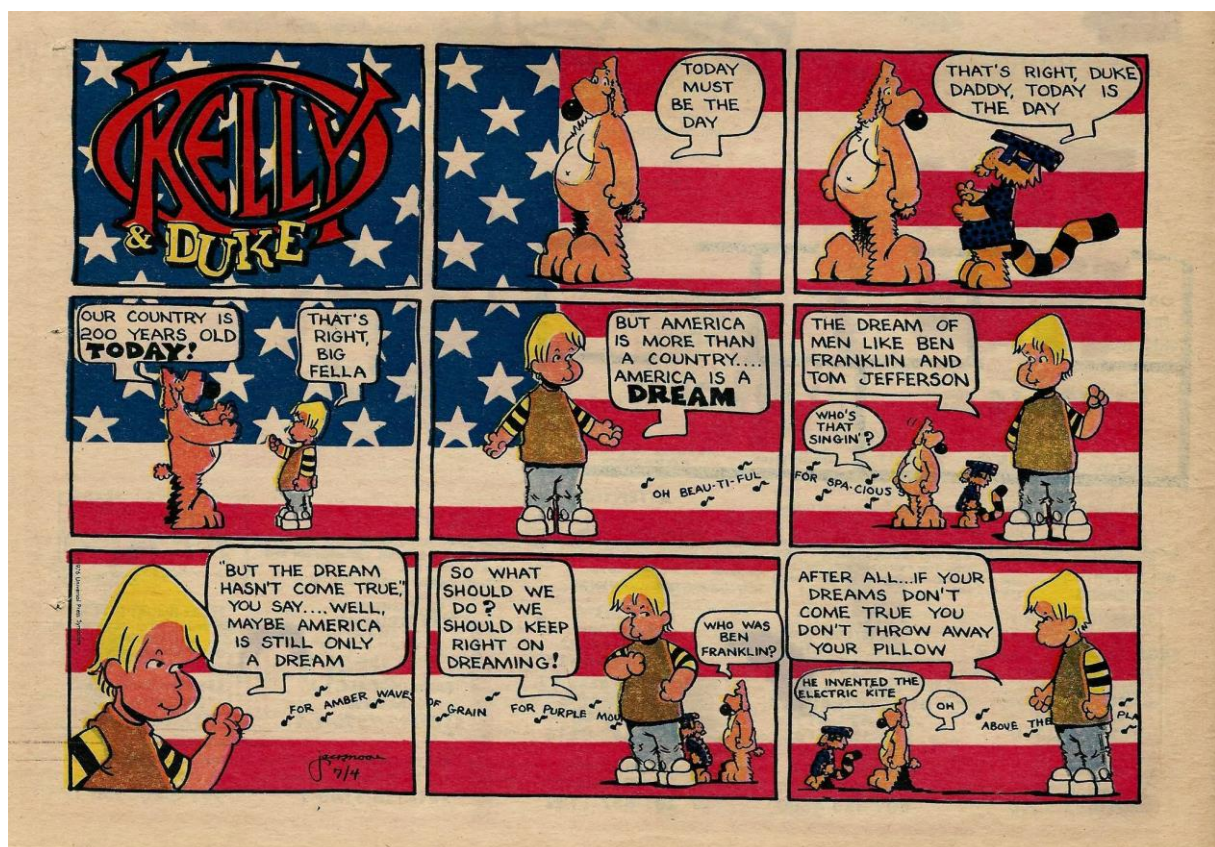
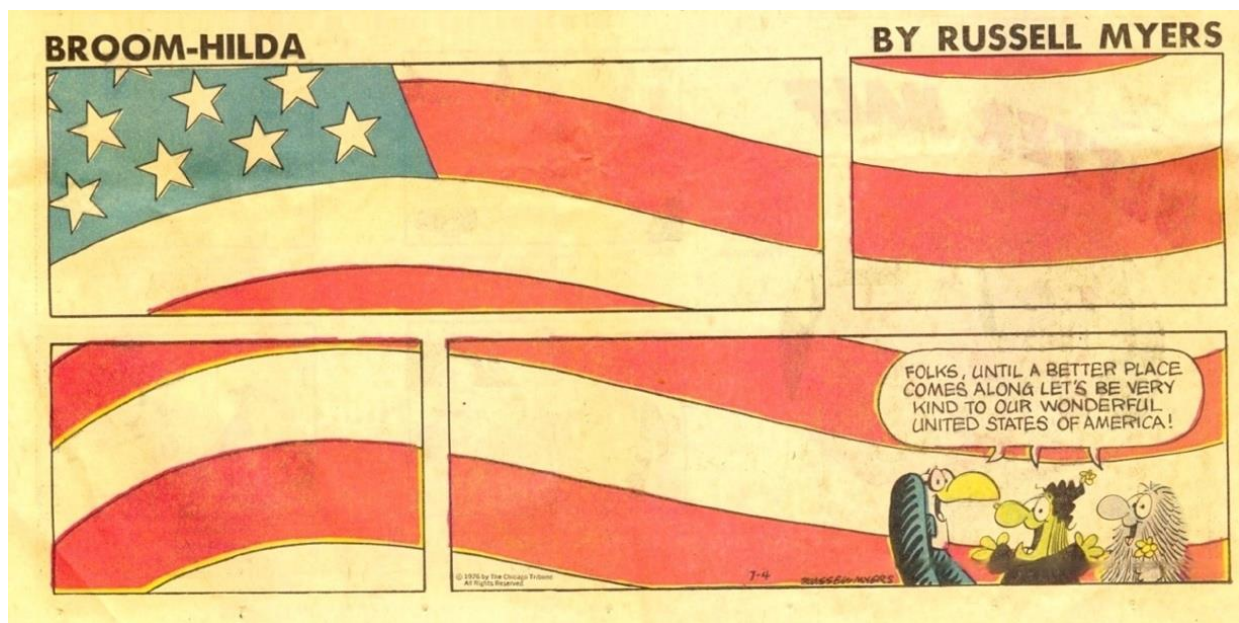


Fig. 21. The Star-Spangled Banner as visual background: *Broom-Hilda* (Russell Myers) and *Kelly and Duke* (Jack Moore).



Fig. 22. The reassertion of American values among family members:
The Jackson Twins (Dick Brooks) and *Tiger* (Bud Blake).

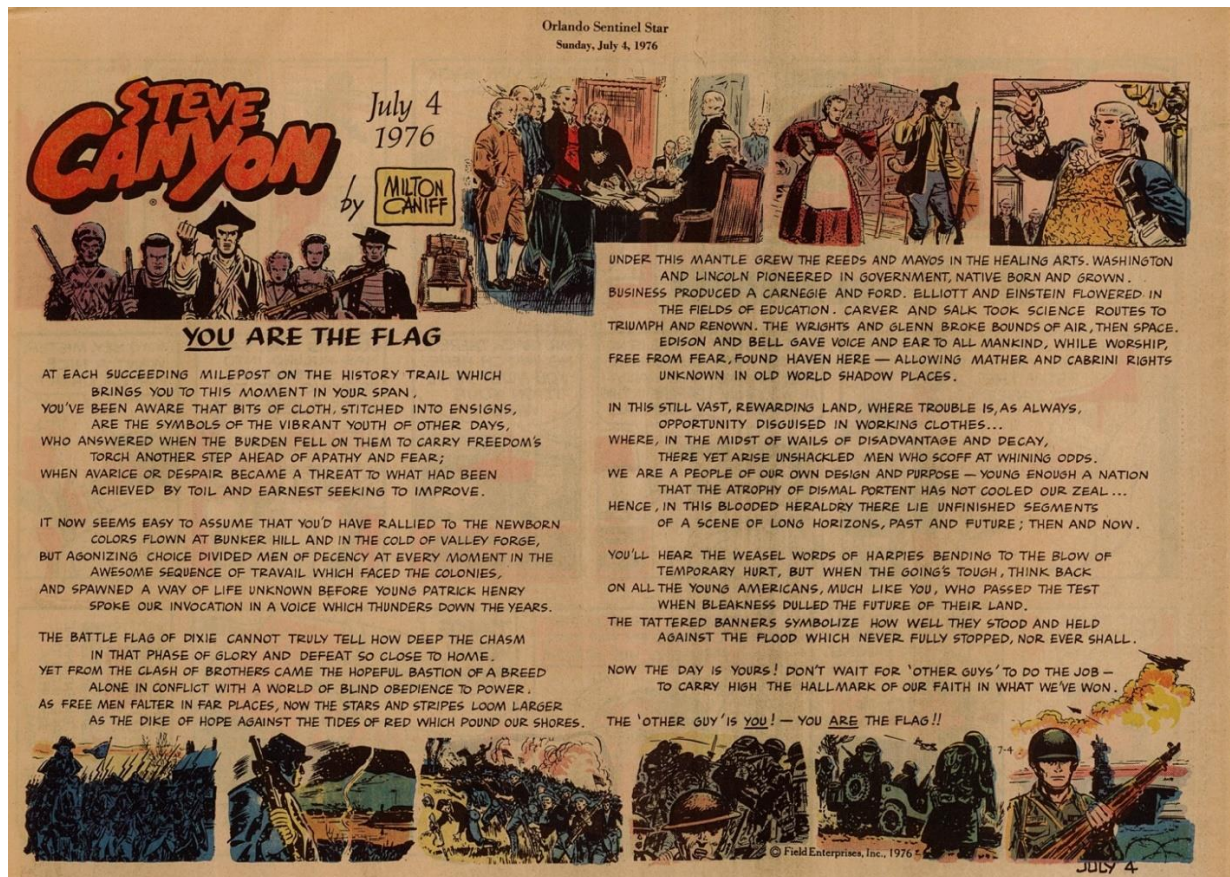


Fig. 23. A grandiloquent tribute to civic patriotism: *Steve Canyon* (Milton Caniff).

- The final category comprises the smallest number of entries: nine strips (17% of the corpus). In contrast to the previous category, these illustrate forms of dissent conveyed by a handful of “left-leaning” cartoonists expressing critical perspectives on the meaning of the national commemoration: Garry Trudeau (*Doonesbury*), through a dialogue between a white patriot and a black man in 1776, offers a sarcastic take on “this equality stuff” in the Declaration of Independence; Tom Batiuk (*Funky Winkerbean*) questions the relevance of fireworks set off in broad daylight (Fig. 24); Morrie Brickman (*the small society*) stages a dialogue about the Bicentennial between an enthusiast and a disillusioned observer; Tim Menees (*Wordsmith*) depicts a journalist listing his grievances about 1976 America before a bewildered George Washington (Fig. 25). One of the most interesting strips is Tom K. Ryan’s parodic Western *Tumbleweeds* (Fig. 26): its Bicentennial page shows a large single borderless panel featuring two of the series’ protagonists (the tongue-in-cheek cowboy Tumbleweeds and the nameless Poohawk Chief) beside John Trumbull’s iconic 1820 painting *The Declaration of Independence, July 4th, 1776*, which occupies the right three-quarters of the page, leaving a large empty space to the left. This skewed composition invites the reader to take with a grain of salt the protagonist’s statement that he has “invited a few old friends to help celebrate a very special occasion,” and exemplifies the understated humor characteristic of a strip often critical of authority and imbued with an anti-establishment tone.

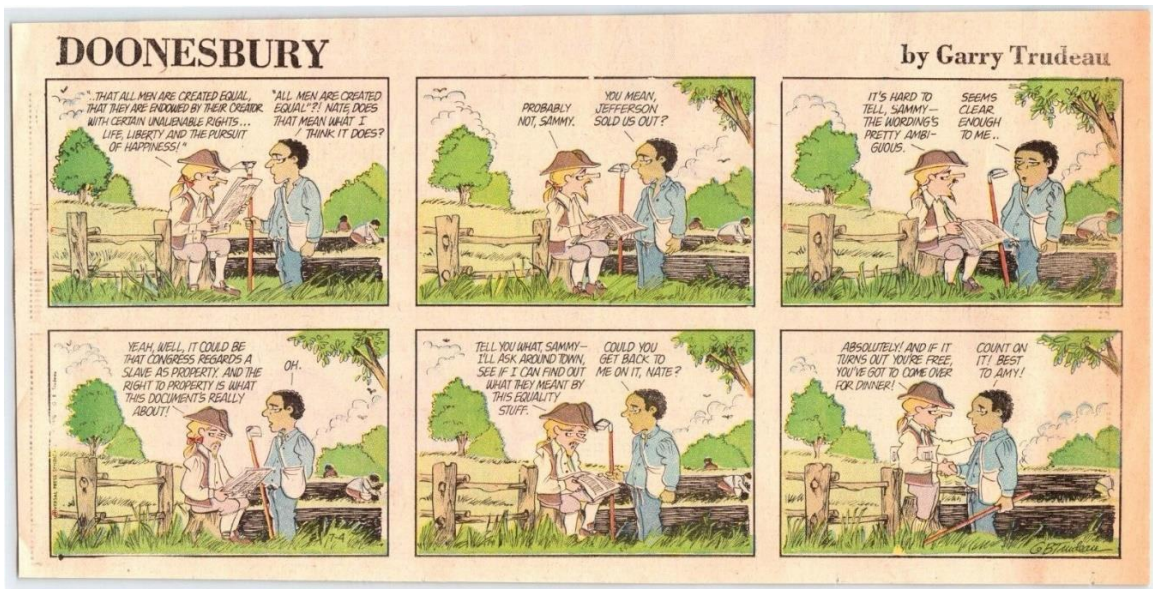


Fig. 24. An ironic commentary on racial equality: *Doonesbury* (Garry Trudeau).

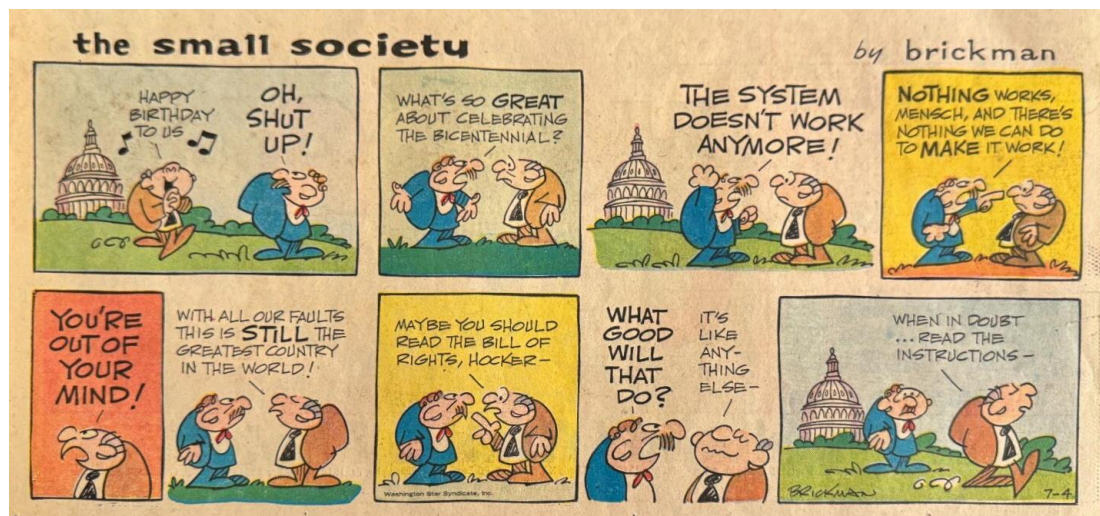


Fig. 25. The pros and cons of the Bicentennial: *The Small Society* (Brickman) and *Wordsmith* (Tim Menees).



Fig. 26. An awkward citation of John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence*:
Tumbleweeds (Tom K. Ryan).

In breaking with the prevailing consensualism of the weekend, these distanced perspectives on the national holiday appeared scarcely less biting than the page drawn by Jules Feiffer in the New York weekly *The Village Voice*, depicting Uncle Sam in dark glasses and a wheelchair enumerating the ills of contemporary American society, concluding with the phrase “The Bicentennial Dream.” (Fig. 27)

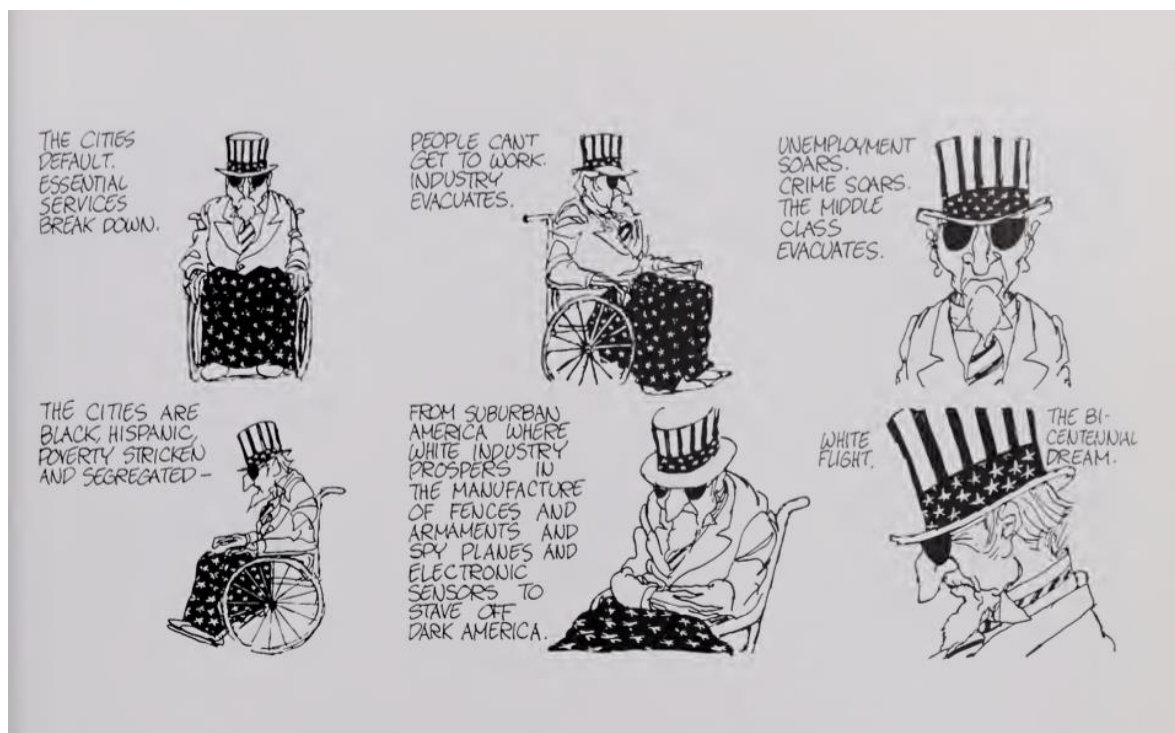


Fig. 27. A curmudgeonly Uncle Sam thoroughly disillusioned with the Bicentennial: *Feiffer* (Jules Feiffer).

The Bicentennial of Sunday Comics: More “Fourth of July” than “1776.”

A number of concluding remarks are warranted. Of the fifty-three strips examined, thirty-two (61%) feature a full or partial representation of the American flag. By contrast, twenty-one strips (40%) refer to the American Revolution or to the year 1776. Only ten of the fifty-two (19%) combine both elements and five (9.5%) feature neither one (*Captain Easy*, *Eek & Meek*, *Friends and Romans*, *Gasoline Alley*, *Miss Peach*).

The relevance of this distinction merits clarification. It is first important to recall that the Stars and Stripes did not yet exist in 1776; it was not until June 14, 1777, that the Continental Congress adopted the flag in a form largely identical to that known today, consisting of thirteen red and white stripes and a constellation of stars on a blue field in the upper-left canton. This emblem subsequently became the preeminent symbol of the American nation. Technically, the association of the national flag with the celebration of Independence constitutes an anachronism from a historiographical perspective, even though it functions as a routine—and arguably self-evident—commemorative gesture for the American public.

In the Sunday comic strips published on July 4, 1976, the annual celebration of the national holiday clearly took precedence over any explicit commemoration of the Revolution itself. The ritualized practices of Independence Day—flags, parades, and fireworks—supplanted the more historically specific remembrance of 1776. Daily newspapers, which in the mid-1970s remained central cultural artefacts within the domestic sphere, predominantly offered comic strips that, when engaging with the Bicentennial, foregrounded the cultural resonances of the national holiday. These strips more rarely represented the event as a commemoration of a distant, heroic, and patriotic past, and more often as the recurrent ritual of the Fourth of July: a reassuring and predictable moment embedded in everyday life and structured around ostensibly “traditional” collective festivities, many of which were effectively detached from the historicity of 1776.

This emphasis on the contemporaneity of July 4—even in the exceptional context of the Bicentennial—rather than on the historical moment of 1776, can be attributed far more to the medium of dissemination—the daily newspaper—than to the comics medium as such. A comparison with Bicentennial-themed material published in 1976 in mainstream comic books supports this interpretation: issues distributed through newsstands display a markedly higher frequency of narratives closely aligned with the American national mythos (albeit often in highly folkloric and at times apocryphal forms) than with representations centered on the conventional festive dimensions of the Fourth of July (Gabilliet).

Conclusion

The examination of comic strips referencing the Bicentennial of 1976 highlights—as might be expected—a plurality of uses of national memory within American popular culture. The proposed typology reveals the coexistence, within Sunday newspapers, of two broad sets of productions. On the one hand, comics whose contents remained largely “apolitical,” whether they focused on representations of Fourth of July festivities as metonymies of a national memory with relatively superficial historical content (category 1), or foregrounded collective memorial imagery without necessarily exalting its patriotic semantics (category 2). On the other hand, categories 3 and 4 displayed markedly more ideological content, whether in the direction of a consensual celebration of Americanism (category 3) or, conversely, of a dissensus prolonging the previous decade’s countercultural questioning of Americanism (category 4).

Unsurprisingly, the collective representations visible in the Bicentennial-themed comic strips that ran in July 4, 1976 newspapers reflected the tensions of the “Age of Limits,” within a society in which the most traditional forms of the American national narrative are readily integrated into festive or humorous frameworks, even as a significant minority introduces dissonant perspectives, interrogating the nation’s founding ideals in light of contemporary realities. Despite their apparent spontaneity and their traditional status as a familial and apolitical enclave within daily newspapers, these Sunday pages appear, fifty years later, as so many mirrors of the contradictions of American society in 1976, where commemorative memory and civic debate coexisted without resolving their divergences.

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B. C. (Field Enterprises). Script and art by Johnny Hart.

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