

Walt & SkeeziX.

by

Frank O. King.



1923 & 1924.

Drawn & Quarterly Books,
MONTREAL.



For Drewanna.

Introduction

by

Jeet Heer.

Vacations were very important to Frank King, both in his personal life and as a cartoonist. Soon after King married Delia Drew in 1911, they went for a jaunt up the West Coast of the United States and Canada to Alaska. They continued to be an adventurous and outdoorsy couple even after the birth of their first and only child Robert in 1916. As we saw in the first volume of *Walt and Skeezix*, the Kings made a cross-country trip to Yellowstone National Park in 1922, which was simultaneously replicated by the characters of *Gasoline Alley*.

In making their long vacations, the Kings benefited from the fact that the automobile was opening up America to mass tourism. While still decades away from the easy motor-ing made possible by motels and interstate highways, car travel was already expanding

the range of vacation destinations. With the building of the Lincoln Highway, which started in 1913, it became easier for families to plan out long auto trips. Middle-class families could now go camping and own cottages, activities previously the reserve of the wealthy.

Frank King, seeking to patiently capture the texture of middle America, used long car trips as a way of showing how his characters behaved when removed from the familiar world of their neighborhood. In this volume, we see two more continent-spanning journeys: in 1923, Walt Wallet, the strip's portly leading man, races across the country in competition with his penny-pinching pal Avery. The following year, Walt and his adopted son, Skeezix, make an excursion to the Rainbow Bridge in Utah by way of the Grand Canyon and Monument Valley, and also go on an extended camping trip.

Interestingly, even secondary characters are shown taking time off. In a fascinating sequence from late 1924, we see Rachel, Walt's African-American maid, visiting her folks back in Alabama. Rachel's holiday is worth lingering over a bit, for what it says about vacations in the strip, and also because it forces us to re-think any easy labeling of her as a racial stereotype. True, in her speech and physical appearance, Rachel conforms to the long-held image of the ever-grinning and wide-eyed pickaninny. Yet, in a manner similar to Mark Twain, King had the ability to take a stereotype and turn it into a complex character.

Although marred by a slight air of condescension, King's portrayal of Rachel, at its best, displays a genuine affection for her and an alert curiosity about her background. Unlike almost any other black comic strip character of her time, Rachel doesn't exist merely to serve her white masters. She has a life outside her job, including a rural family that looks upon her as a big city success. Like the most engaging characters in *Gasoline Alley*, Rachel has a well-rounded personality, defined by geography and family background. (Well-rounded, of course, has more than one meaning: the warm characters in *Gasoline Alley* almost always have soft edges or ovular shapes. Skinny and angular characters tend to be less friendly in King's world).



Original artwork for the *Gasoline Alley* daily strip, dated Wednesday, November 7th, 1923, and given to his granddaughter Drewanna in 1960. Hiring a housemaid was not at all uncommon in the early decades of the century for affluent white families, despite its inherently unpleasant carryover of customs from antebellum days. King's portrayal of Rachel, while indefensibly "of its day," was a more sympathetic, human character than what many of his contemporaries offered. Opposite: The Kings on the porch of their Glencoe, Illinois home, c. 1912, which Frank King built after living in a series of apartments in Chicago. From left to right: Delia's mother and father, Frank King, King's brother-in-law Walter Drew, William Gannon (the models for the characters, respectively, of "Walt" and "Bill" in the *Gasoline Alley* comic strip), Delia Drew King, and Gertie Gannon.

Vacations, then, were important to King as a tool for character development. By showing his large cast away from home, he could explore their background and family life. When members of the cast went on the road, King was able to let them interact with each other like an extended family. For example, while camping, Walt and his buddies tease each other in typical male fashion, demonstrating affection through practical jokes and ribbings.





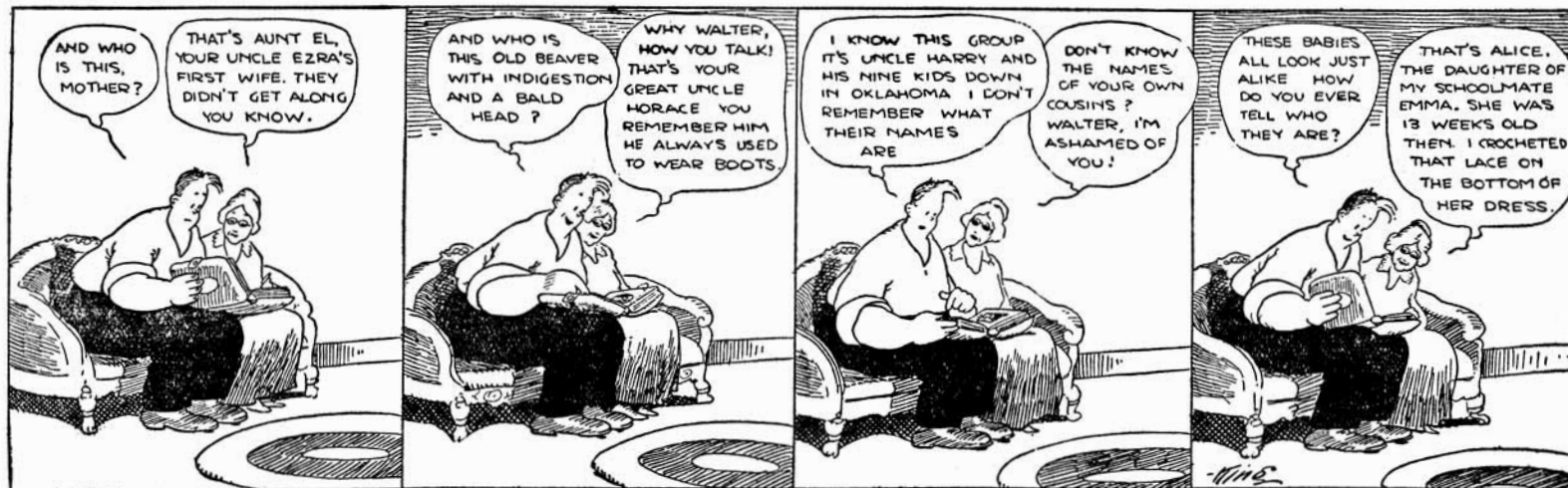
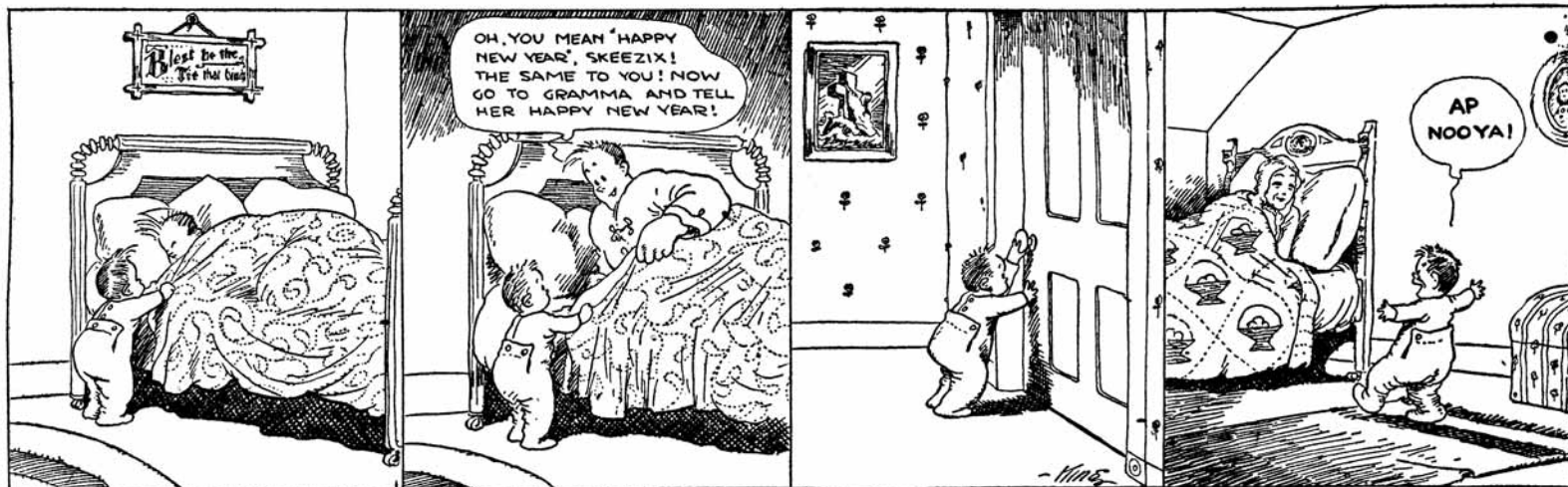


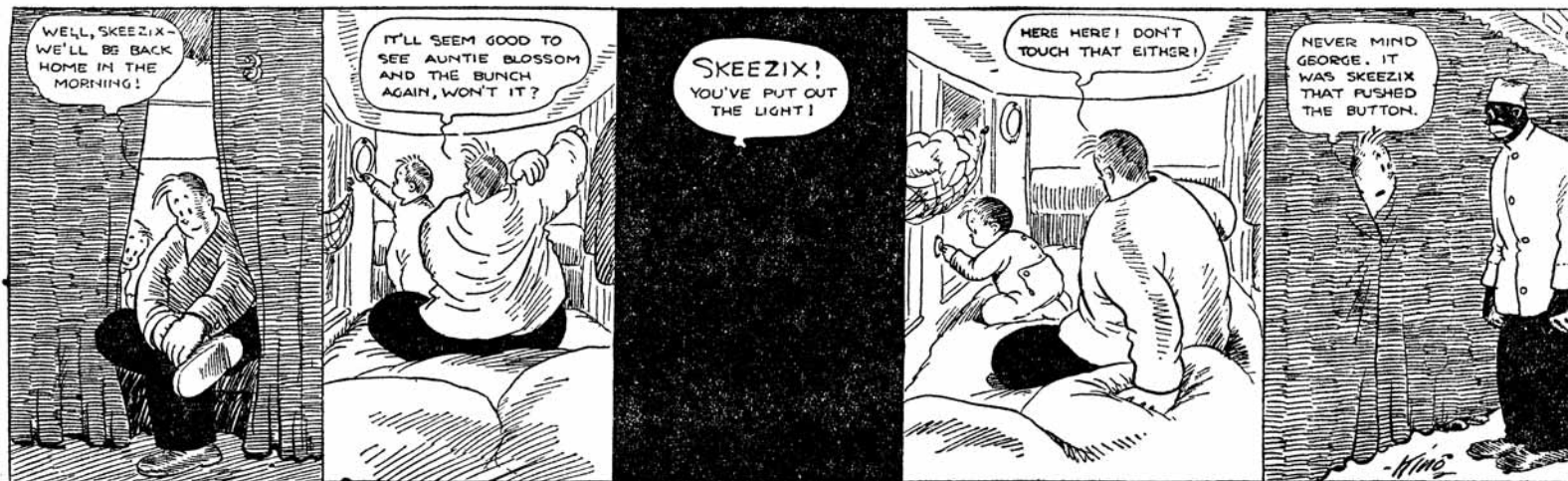
Above: in King's cutline, "Pa and Ma." Opposite: One of King's photographs of the Grand Canyon.

The 1924 Monument Valley sequence, like so many others in *Gasoline Alley*, has autobiographical roots. It was based on a trip King made in 1923 with Delia and some close friends. King was proud of the fact that on this vacation they roughed it out and "slept on the desert without a tent."

While in Monument Valley, the Kings met John and Louisa Wetherill, a pioneering couple whose trading post and lodge was a haven for both the Navajo and many cartoonists. George Herriman, Jimmy Swinnerton, and Rudolph Dirks were among the cartoonists who also lodged with the Wetherills. Because of the hospitality of the Wetherills,







January 3rd and 4th.



