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The first piece of original Carl Barks art that I was privileged to see and hold in my trembling hands was the splash panel from “Stranger Than Fiction,” a 10-page story Carl was working on for a forthcoming issue of *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories*.

## Memories of Meeting the Master

by Joseph Cowles

**At about age ten** I discovered that I had a natural sense of “the line,” and for the remainder of my school years would lean toward a career in art. Specifically, I imagined taking up cartooning as a profession. It seemed an easy, fun-filled and rather glamorous career.

As a teen, I worked after school, weekends, holidays, and during summer vacations at Disneyland, in Anaheim, California. There I had the pleasure of meeting and developing warm nodding acquaintances with a number of folks who

had Disney connections through the film studios in Burbank.

Bruce McIntyre, teacher of freehand drawing to all the elementary students in nearby Carlsbad School District, spent most weekends and vacation days in Tomorrowland, drawing on huge sheets of paper with fat-tipped felt pens: Scrooge, Donald, Daisy, Goofy, Pluto, Mickey, Minnie, Peter Pan, Tinkerbell, Captain Hook and any other Disney character one could think to request. Mr. McIntyre may not have been “The Good Artist,” but he

was an excellent artist and a marvelous art instructor.

**My first Disneyland position**, as a busboy, began on my 16th birthday. That summer I spent every free moment watching Mr. McIntyre draw personalized newsprint

With slightly different editing, the text of this article appears on Peter Kylling’s Danish website, [www.cbarks.dk](http://www.cbarks.dk), and has also been excerpted in Egmont’s *Carl Barks Collection*, edited by Geoffrey Blum.

posters for dozens of people hourly, at one dollar per poster. He indicated that he got to keep half of the receipts. Not bad for an art teacher's summer job, in a day when the minimum wage was a dollar an hour.

Mr. McIntyre gave me one of his clever Drawing Textbooks, and showed me how to achieve greater depth in my drawings and how to polish my work so that it looked more professional. He taught me more illustration techniques during a single lunch break than I had learned in an entire semester at school. Eventually, the educational boost I received from his guidance gave me ability and confidence—from the standpoint of drawing, at least—to work alongside any other artist as a peer.

A couple of years later, it was Mickey Mouse Club "Mooseketeer" Roy Williams

who explained to me that Disney comic books weren't produced at the studios, but were created under license by Western Publishing in Los Angeles. I told Roy that I was interested in contacting the cartoonist who wrote and drew the "good" duck stories I and my friends had long enjoyed reading. Roy suggested that if I were to pay a visit to Western's office in Beverly Hills, someone might give me the cartoonist's name and mailing address. Roy said the fellow had worked on Donald Duck and other animated shorts in the late Thirties and early Forties, calling him "The best gag man in the business."

**Before long I did visit** Western Publishing and met several comic book editors. They told me the artist I sought was named Carl Barks, speaking glowingly of the old fellow

and the amazing popularity of his work. *Walt Disney's Comics & Stories*, they proudly boasted, was the number one comic book in the industry, with sales around three million copies each month.

The folks at Western gave me Carl's post office box address in San Jacinto, and I wrote my inquiry letter—which my brother, David, helped me edit, removing all the gushing praise. ("Just so the guy won't think there's something wrong with you.")

Soon I received a reply from Carl Barks, who wrote, "I'm not sure my advice about cartooning would be very helpful, as I am pretty ignorant on the subject, myself. The Donald Duck comic book work is about the only experience I've had in the business, and I just feel my way along on that."

P.O. Box 818  
San Jacinto, Calif.  
Oct. 19, 1960

Mr. Joe Cowles

Dear Joe: In reply to your letter of the 13th. I must say I'm not sure my advice about cartooning would be very helpful, as I am pretty ignorant on the subject, myself. The Donald Duck comic book work is about the only experience I've had in the business, and I just feel my way along on that.

However, if you'd like to look at my work methods and see how I develop my ideas into plots and plots into drawings, you're welcome to pop in any day, afternoon or evenings. The wife and I always go shopping in the mornings.

Our home address is 1421 Poppy Drive, Hemet. Poppy Dr. is a new residence street off South Girard Ave. just east of Hemet. Girard is the street that runs from Highway 74 to the Ramona Bowl. Telephone number is Olive 8-3712.

It would be a pleasure for me to meet a reader who digs comic books. Up here in the bible belt people only read the good book and the Walnut Growers' Nutshell News.

Sincerely yours



Carl Barks

"I'm not sure my advice about cartooning would be very helpful, as I am pretty ignorant on the subject myself," wrote the world's most prolific cartoonist.

**And then the miracle:** “However, if you’d like to look at my work methods and see how I develop my ideas into plots and plots into drawings, you’re welcome to pop in any day, afternoon or evenings.”

David kindly volunteered to drive me out to Hemet in his brand new baby blue MGA convertible. (Later on I gathered that David’s kindness might also have been encouraged by our well-meaning mother, wanting him to accompany his younger brother—“In case,” she may have said, expressing her concerns, “that strange cartoonist inviting Joe into his home *isn’t quite right*.” At the time of the visit I was too naïve to understand the euphemism or its connotation.)

**There were no freeways** leading to the San Jacinto Valley in those days, but most rural communities in Southern California were accessible on pretty good roads. The drive south to San Juan Capistrano and East to Hemet took a little over three hours from Anaheim. A great deal of the drive time was spent slowly winding our way through Cleveland National Forest on the narrow mountain road. This cut short the time available for this visit, and that of my trips to see the Barkses later on.

**We were politely dressed.** David wore a sports coat and slacks, I had on a cardigan sweater, long-sleeved Gant shirt, light-weight trousers (with cuffs) and the requisite penny loafers of my generation. Barks was wearing a short-sleeved shirt and comfortable slacks.

[Although I cannot today be certain of this recollection, I visualize Barks always in short sleeves, sometimes with a sleeveless pullover sweater of pale yellow. This image may be a composite of several visits with him, or entirely made up. It is, however, as I remember him.]

**I rang the doorbell.** I had no idea what to expect, and neither did Barks. I scarcely knew why I was there, other than that I had somehow garnered an invitation to



As this vignette from an old Standard Oil road map shows, there were no freeways leading to the San Jacinto Valley. My brother drove down from Hollywood to meet me in Anaheim. We took Highway 101 south to San Juan Capistrano, then Highway 74 winding through the Cleveland National Forest, past Lake Elsinore, and on into Hemet.

visit him, and was not about to pass up the opportunity of my young life.

The door opened, and behind the screen door I saw a wide smile and a thick pair of glasses with enormous earpieces, housing the hearing device the editors at Western told me Barks would be wearing. He was as tall as I. We stood eye to eye, each an inch or so over six feet, and I was still growing.

Carl Barks was not at all what I had expected, even though I thought I wasn’t expecting anything. I realized that I had been thinking of him as short, like Walt Kelly or Al Capp. And I really didn’t know whether they were short, other than in my imagination. This Barks fellow and I, we resembled each other somewhat.

**He invited us to come inside.** Barks was relaxed, alert, quick, funny, attentive, capable, and a bit shy—all at once. He made us feel at ease immediately. I learned at Western that his wife, Garé, was missing an arm. Being a very young, unsophisticated, nineteen-year-old Southern Californian adolescent in 1960, I didn’t

know how to behave regarding matters such as this. So I made a point of doing and saying nothing.

**I was not there as a fan.** As a matter of fact, I hadn’t a clue as to who Carl Barks was. About *him*, I knew nothing. It is the body of his *work* that I had known and enjoyed throughout my life. (Yes, I had only been around for nineteen years. But from my perspective, that was a lifetime. The works of The Good Artist had *always* been there for me.

My first reading aloud—reading to my mother after she had been reading to me—was from a Donald Duck story written and illustrated by The Good Artist: *Frozen Gold*. I was not yet four years old. The works of this master storyteller have been with me since the dawn of my sentience.)

The first thing I needed was to see a sample of the old boy’s work, just to make sure he was the right guy. After all, if The World’s Best Cartoonist invites you to visit, there’s got to be a catch, right? Likewise, I can imagine Carl might have said to Garé,

“Keep an eye on these two. Don’t let ‘em slip anything into their pockets.”

Neither party had a notion of what to expect. For our part, if it had turned out that we’d invited ourselves to meet the wrong guy—one of those *other* duck artists—we could have made an early exit.

**From the first glimpse** of the stack of drawings Barks handed me, I knew we’d come to the right place and this was, indeed, the right guy. What I was looking at were the Mozart manuscript pages of the comic book world. How clean was this man’s work! Every inked stroke was crisp and definitive. You know how some cartoonists’ artwork is a struggled concoction of labored drawings in ink and white-out? Barks’ original art was composed of soft, light blue pencil lines and quick form-sketches, overlain in rich black India ink with Speedball-lettered text and fluid

Esterbrook pen strokes. He used no white-out at all, except that with which to dart highlights onto the ducks’ eyes. Each of the half-page masterpieces he showed me was impeccably, impossibly perfect.

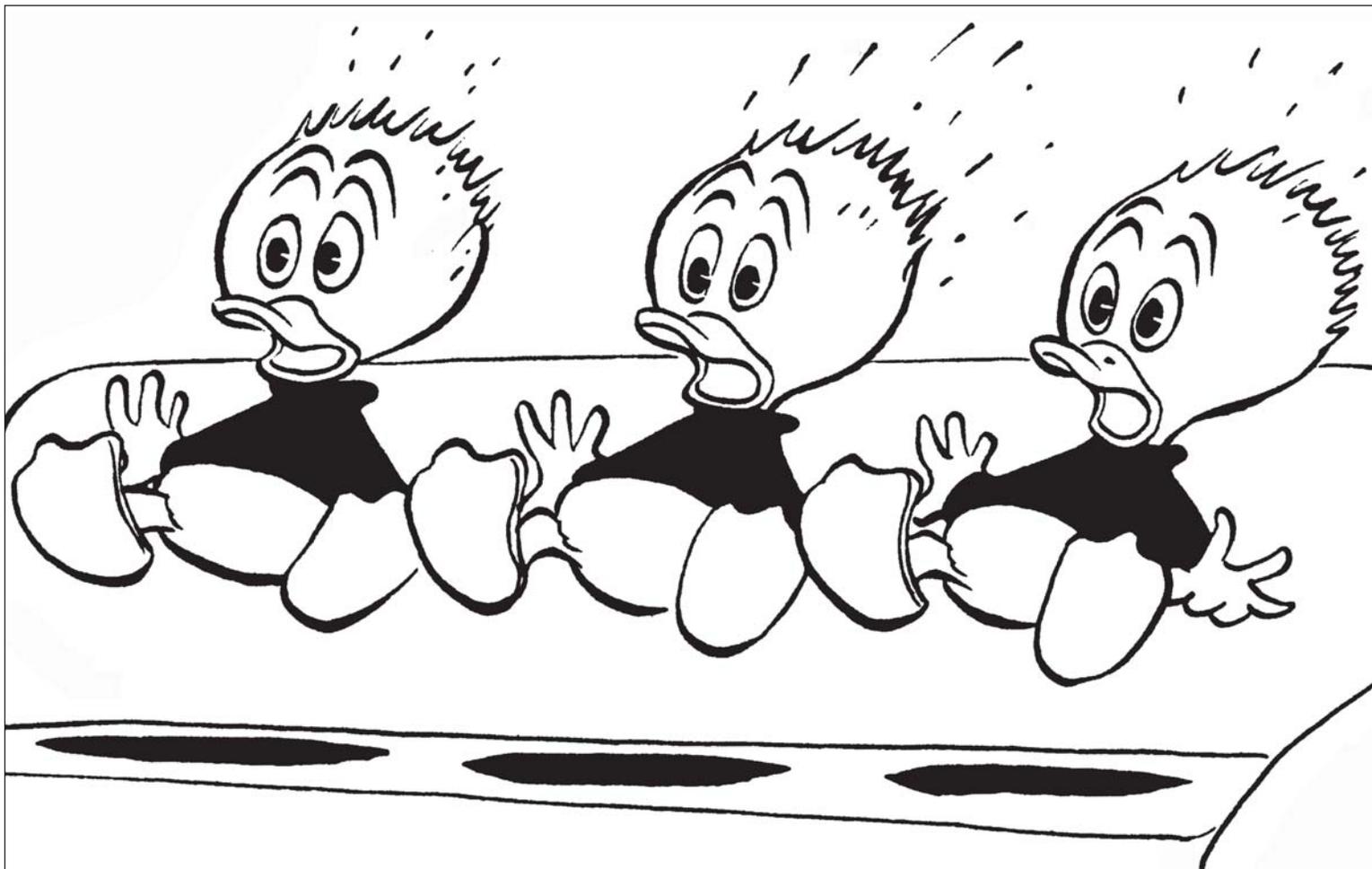
**By age nineteen**, there had been enough life in my life that I had become pretty cool about masking my emotions. Yet, holding those precious sheets, I felt tears welling in my eyes. They were so beautiful! The 10-page story I was looking at, “Stranger Than Fiction,” was for a *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories* slated to hit the comic book racks in about six months.

*Donald wants to teach his nephews a lesson. He gets Gyro to let him use the inventor’s new matter-transmission device (which looks suspiciously like a meat grinder) to transport him across town and pay a surprise call on the kids. A power failure leaves Donald’s head*

*stuck in one location and his tailparts, ungraciously, somewhere else.*

**I looked up from where I sat**, art boards in my lap, to see Barks standing there watching me. (I hoped I had been laughing in all the right places.) Barks was positively glowing from the pure joy of observing someone else—an unknown entity, at that—experiencing pleasure from his work. From this moment on, we each knew the other was okay.

**“You need to speak up,”** Garé told me. “Even with his hearing aids, it’s difficult for him.” I was shy and soft-spoken around new people, especially adults. *Especially elderly adults.* I thought, “*He must be sixty!*” We were in the small, clean and efficient kitchen. Garé was boiling water for coffee or tea. I saw that it was her left arm that was missing, from



Huey, Dewey and Louie are frightened by the sudden appearance of their uncle emerging from a Gyro Gearloose matter-transmission machine. This vignette is pictured about the size of the original drawing by Carl Barks. Until our first meeting, I had only seen his work reduced down, poorly colored and printed on cheap newsprint stock.

below the elbow. Garé had her back to me. She lifted her arm high so that I could see, pinched at the end somehow, that she was holding a paper matchbook. Her right arm moved in a graceful arc, striking a match on the book, and bringing the flame up to light the white filter-tipped cigarette she held in her lips. She turned and gave me a wink. I laughed, heartily—hoping that I was supposed to.

**Barks and my brother** came into the kitchen. We were given a snack before getting back on the road. I turned up the gain on my voice as much as I thought I was able to without yelling. “Where are the other pages?” *Haven’t done ‘em yet.* “How does it end?” *Guess you’ll have to wait until it comes out.*

“Carl!” Garé exclaimed. “Don’t tease. Show him your worksheets.”

From behind his back, Barks brought forth several sheets of ruled yellow paper.

They were his original notes for the story, in narrative form, with an occasional sketch of what he wanted the finished art to look like. Every panel, every page, was represented. Here and there, dialog was scratched out, and new text written—almost the same, but tighter, better. In their own way, these pages were also works of art, from the hand of the master cartoonist. Before he began working on the art boards, for every one of the stories, pages and panels he ever wrote or drew, Barks thoroughly staged and plotted the details. (No wonder he didn’t need white-out.)

**I of course don’t remember** all of this exactly as I am telling it here, or the dialog word for word. Forty-eight years is a rather long reach. In my mind’s eye, Garé served spoon coffee. Folger’s Crystals or Yuban or another popular instant. David and I added sugar and milk—Carnation evapo-

rated, straight from the can. These are suppositions. What isn’t supposed is the fact that Carl lightened his beverage with canned soy milk, a substitute for cream, due to his body’s intolerance of dairy products. I exclaimed, “Yuk!” Not loudly, but perhaps Barks could hear more clearly than he let on.

**My brother saved the day:** “I had cow’s milk allergy as a child,” he said to Barks. “Had to drink goat’s milk. When we lived in Oregon.”

Barks warmed to the conversation. “Where in Oregon?” *Klamath Falls area. Near Rogue River and Grants Pass.* “Really? I’m from that neck-o’-th’woods. Merrill, Oregon . . .”

Later, David and Carl brought out their cameras and took several pictures. Upon our departure, we thanked one another for a wonderful visit and agreed that we would meet again soon.



PHOTO BY DAVID M. COMBES

One of the photos my brother took during our first visit with the Barkses. David located the transparencies, faded and color-shifted, while doing some family genealogy research in 2008, almost half a century after our first meeting with the master cartoonist. This image has been scanned and digitally “color restored.” Thank goodness for Photoshop!