

... AND STILL THE
WORLD CHAMPION...
JOE PALOOKA!

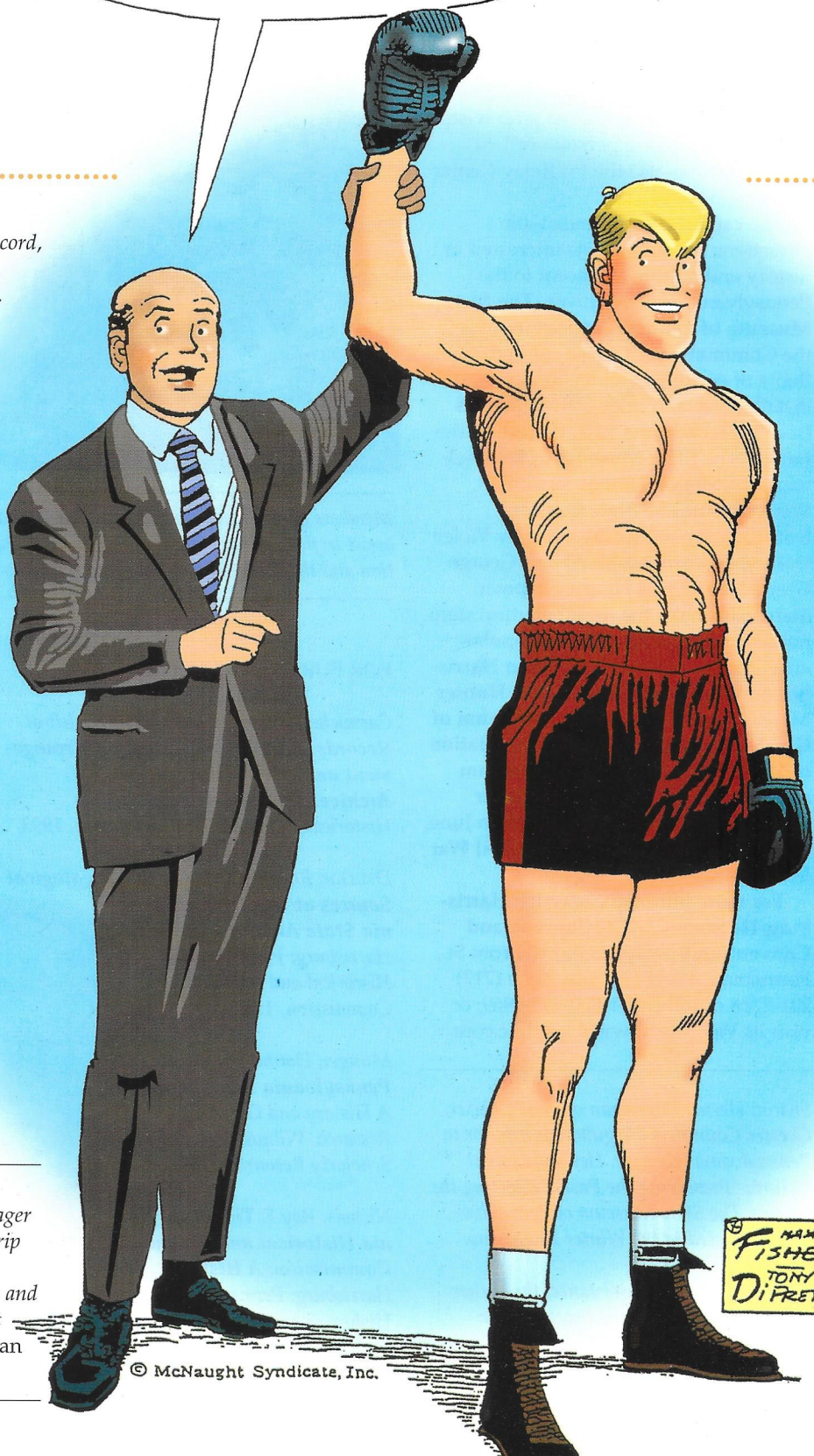


In 1921, Hammond Fisher (1900-1955), a young staff artist for the *Wilkes-Barre Record*, was conversing with a local boxer, Joe Hardy, on Wilkes-Barre's Public Square. The two were comparing their childhoods in the rough neighborhoods of the anthracite region community where they had learned to fight at an early age. Some, like Hardy, took their street skills to the local gymnasiums and refined them in the ring. Others, like Fisher, became avid boxing fans who ardently followed the sport.

As Fisher listened to Hardy's recitation of his boxing career, the irony of such a mildmannered fellow engaging in a cold-blooded sport mesmerized him. Suddenly, an irresistible urge seized the newspaper artist. "I've got it!" he hollered. Before Hardy could utter a word, Fisher socked him in the chest, turned, and raced—like one possessed—towards his office across the square.

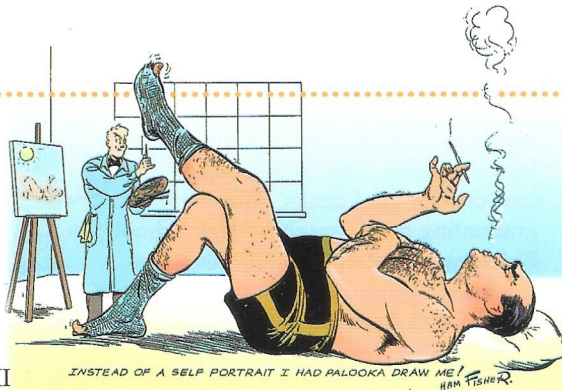
Ham Fisher wasn't running from Joe Hardy as much as he was running for his drawing paper. Their conversation had given him the inspiration, then and there, to create a comic strip about a hulking, simple-minded boxer who would represent the hopes and dreams of small-town America that he came to know and emulate in the Luzerne County seat.

From Wilkes-Barre to the nation's comics pages: Boxing champ Joe Palooka and his garrulous manager and promoter Knobby Walsh (right). The comic strip was created by Hammond Fisher, believed to be portrayed in cartoon-fashion by one-time assistant and later archival Al Capp (facing page, top). Portrait detail of Palooka from a movie poster for Gentleman Joe Palooka (facing page, bottom).



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Known to millions of Americans simply as Joe Palooka, Fisher's cartoon character made his debut on April 21, 1930. The cartoon eventually became a staple of comic sections in hundreds of newspapers nationwide. Within two decades, Palooka inspired movies, comic books, and radio shows. World War II brought Fisher an even larger audience. He transformed Palooka from a semiliterate stumblebum into a clean-living soldier who inspired American youth. At the comic strip's peak of popularity in the 1950s, fifty million Americans each day followed Joe Palooka's adventures, many of them inspired by the folklore of northeastern Pennsylvania's



Wyoming Valley. By its final syndicated appearance in 1984, the cartoon had left a formidable legacy by helping to define the popular image of an American hero.

In the Roaring Twenties, Wilkes-Barre, with a population of eighty-six thousand

residents, was a prosperous city of foundries and shops. Although the anthracite industry had reached its peak production during the World War I, continuing prosperity seemed assured. Nearly half of region's coal was mined in Luzerne County. If the Great Depression was just around the corner, the city certainly gave no indication of it. Charming parks graced both sides of the Market Street Bridge, which arched its way over the picturesque Susquehanna River. Kirby Park was the city's centerpiece, with its magnificent trees, formal

gardens, large wading pool, and yellow stucco bandstand.

Stores lining Wilkes-Barre's busy Public Square were booming, the crowds, cheerful and optimistic. Trolleys carried shoppers and businessmen from the surrounding boroughs into downtown. And opportunities for entertainment abounded.

It was the golden age of spectator sports.

Baseball commanded singular attention in the coal region. The introduction of the lively ball game and the legendary feats of the New York Yankees, which often barnstormed through the region, captivated city residents and



Joe Palooka

Wilkes-Barre Boxing Legend
With a National Punch

by William C. Kashatus

patch town dwellers alike. What's more, Wilkes-Barre could boast of its own professional team, the Barons, a minor-league affiliate of the Cleveland Indians. Despite its last-place finish in its inaugural season of 1925, the team set a new attendance record for Class B baseball as a total of one hundred and nine thousand fans jammed Artillery Park to see the Barons play. High school football drew a great following, attracting many immigrants who had been fond of rugby in their youth. Boxing was also wildly popular as hundreds packed the local arenas on Saturday nights to watch prize fighters slug it out. Major bouts, which attracted thousands, were often held at Kirby Park during the summer months.

Each sport produced its own hero. Baseball had Babe Ruth; football, Red

Grange; and boxing, Jack Dempsey. Movies, with their newsreel footage, transformed these athletes into larger-than-life figures. Comics would also seem to have been a perfect medium for promoting sports stars, but no one had capitalized on the idea until Ham Fisher offered "Joe Palooka" to the American public.

Born in Wilkes-Barre on September 24, 1900, Hammond Edward Fisher was the son of a Jewish scrapyard dealer. After graduating from Coughlin High School, Fisher, who distinguished himself as a self-taught artist, landed a position at the *Wilkes-Barre Record* as a writer and

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political cartoonist. His distinctive humor quickly caught the attention of several national magazines, which reprinted his work. Then, in 1921, the idea of a mild-hearted, childlike prize fighter gripped him. Over the next six years he submitted "Joe Palooka" to newspaper syndicates only to be repeatedly turned down.

Disillusioned by his prospects of successfully marketing the comic strip from Wilkes-Barre, Fisher moved to New York City in 1927. With only two dollars and fifty cents to his name, he secured a job in the advertising department of the



The first episode of "Joe Palooka" (left) by Ham Fisher (below) which appeared in the April 21, 1930 edition of Wilkes-Barre's daily newspaper, The Times-Leader.



Joe Palooka

EVEN PALOOKA REMEMBERS TO GIVE

New York Daily News. In his spare time, he resubmitted "Palooka" to the syndicates, again with little success. Fisher's big opportunity came in 1930 when he offered his services to the McNaught Syndicate, selling, on commission, other, more established features to newspapers across the country. He earned the trust of general manager Charles McAdams by selling "Dixie Dugan," a strip which at the time appeared in only two papers, to thirty-eight newspapers in just forty-one days. McAdams was so impressed by the effort, he promised to eventually give Fisher's creation "a try." Refusing to wait, Fisher took matters into his own hands. While McAdams was vacationing, he took "Joe Palooka" on the road and in three weeks sold the strip to twenty-two newspapers,



In a 1930s cartoon, Joe Palooka shows Knobby Walsh a string tied around his finger to remind him to give to the Wyoming Valley Welfare Campaign. As the cartoon developed, the drawing of the characters grew more sophisticated.

the store, take their share of merchandise, and tell the newly hired assistant to "charge it." When Walsh finds out, he sends Palooka after them to retrieve the clothing, by force if necessary. In the

duration of the strip. Capp, however, would not. In 1934, he left Fisher to create his own comic strip, "Li'l Abner." Unlike many comic strips of the period, which relied at first on hilarity



The patriotic Palooka goes off to war after saying goodbye to his beloved Anne Howe in a 1943 strip.

including his hometown *Times Leader* and, more importantly, *The New York Mirror*.

In the inaugural episode of "Joe Palooka," Knobby Walsh, owner of a men's clothing store, advertises for an assistant. Joe Palooka, a dim-witted roustabout, responds to the advertisement and is hired. In the very next episode, Palooka is hoodwinked by a group of pool hall sharks that come into

process, Palooka discovers that Nasty McSwat, a heavyweight boxing champion, masterminded the scheme to steal the clothes. Walsh offers Palooka twenty-five dollars to fight McSwat. Not only does he accept the offer, but he promptly knocks out McSwat, becoming the new heavyweight champion.

The following year, Fisher hired Al Capp, a talented young cartoonist, to assist him. Together, they added three

but eventually became serious, "Joe Palooka" was distinguished by its light-hearted humor. Palooka's refreshing innocence, which inevitably elicited a chuckle, became his most famous trait. Invited to a party in a New York penthouse Palooka asks a friend, "That's where they keep people that's got measles and things, ain't it?" Later, at the party, he declines cocktails with a polite, "Er—ah—no, thank youse; but if you got

ice cream I'll have some, if ya please." While readers may have chuckled, they secretly admired his preference. He was, after all, one of them—or perhaps an image of who they wanted to be. Palooka didn't hold grudges. His anger was quick and intense. After he trounced the "bad guy" in the ring and taught him a lesson, all was forgiven. Even his name, prizefighters' slang for a third-rate boxer, appealed to the common man, especially in northeastern Pennsylvania's coal region, where the immigrant's own experience of winding up as the patsy for those with less virtuous ambitions and plenty of guile seemed to mirror Palooka's innocence and sense of trust.

Predictably, Joe Palooka, the graceful lug with thunder in his fist and humility in his heart, grew on the American public. By the mid-thirties, he enjoyed a nationwide following—and not only among sports buffs. CBS launched a radio serial based on the cartoon. United Artists released a motion picture entitled *Palooka*, starting Stuart Erwin as Joe



Fisher's creation inspired several movies.

was simply irresistible. Each week in newspaper comic pages across America, the incorruptible boxing champion humbly maneuvered through the crime world, night clubs, and boxing rings, reminding readers of the classic confrontation between good and evil, the virtuous and the corrupt. Nor were his adventures limited to America. Fisher had his hero travel around the world to distant, exotic lands such as Zanzibar, the tropics, and the fringe of the Arctic.

Ham Fisher's true genius was his ability to make the strip especially relevant to the times and the issues at hand. During the following decade, Palooka would learn to pilot an

airplane, be kidnapped by Prohibition-era bootleggers, and give money to the poor plagued by the Great Depression. Fisher's boldest move was to "borrow" the president as a guest character, something that no cartoonist had ever dared.

The opportunity presented itself when Palooka, having lost his championship title, succumbed to a bout of self-pity and enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. Fisher had him serving in Africa, but the public demand for Palooka's return to redeem himself became so great that the cartoonist had to

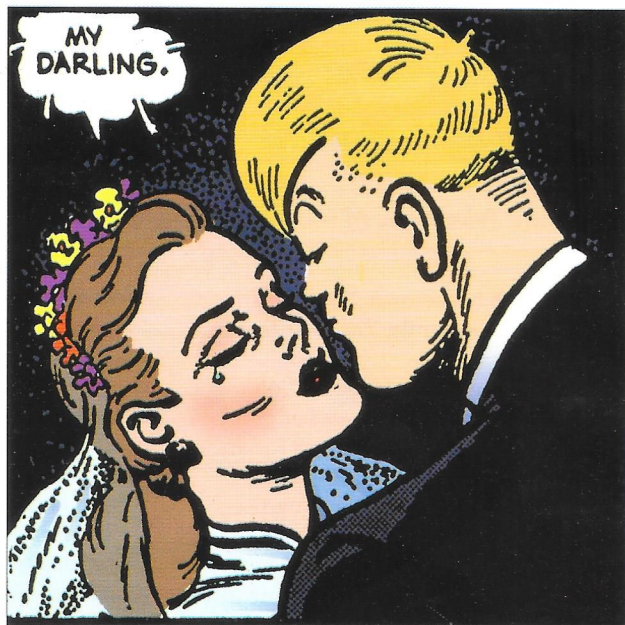
divine a way to bring him back to the United States. Since Palooka was bound by his enlistment, presidential intervention was the only solution to the dilemma. After approaching President Franklin D. Roosevelt's secretaries, Stephen Early and Marvin H. McIntyre—admittedly loyal readers of the cartoon—Fisher secured permission to use FDR in his strip. Shortly after, Knobby Walsh called on a caricatured President Roosevelt to request a letter to the president of France asking for Joe's release. Flashing his famous grin and with a high cock of his trademark cigarette holder, the president granted the request. Fisher had secured a place for himself in the annals of cartoon history. But an encore was yet to come.

On December 4, 1940, a year before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Joe Palooka enlisted in the United States Army. By that time, both he and Knobby Walsh were searching for a new adventure. There was nobody left to fight and Joe had taken to refereeing, a pastime he certainly didn't relish. Knobby, ever eager to make a dollar on his prizefighter, arranged an exhibition match in Cuba.

Readers eagerly awaited the marriage, after a courtship lasting nearly twenty years, of Joe Palooka and his longtime girlfriend, Anne Howe, heiress to the Aromatic Cheese Company fortune, on June 24, 1949

Palooka and Jimmy Durante as Knobby Walsh. Palooka

As part of the 1948 Indiana Limestone Centennial, workers carved a ten-ton statue of Palooka that stands in Bedford, Indiana.



For the first time Joe took a stand.

"Sorry—but I got other plans," Palooka tells his manager.

"What plans?" asks Knobby, surprised by the determination in Palooka's voice.

"I'm gonna enlist in the Army," he replies.

"But, kid—if they want ya they'll take ya," insists Walsh. "Ya got plenty of time for that, you registered."

"I know, but I'm goin' anyway."

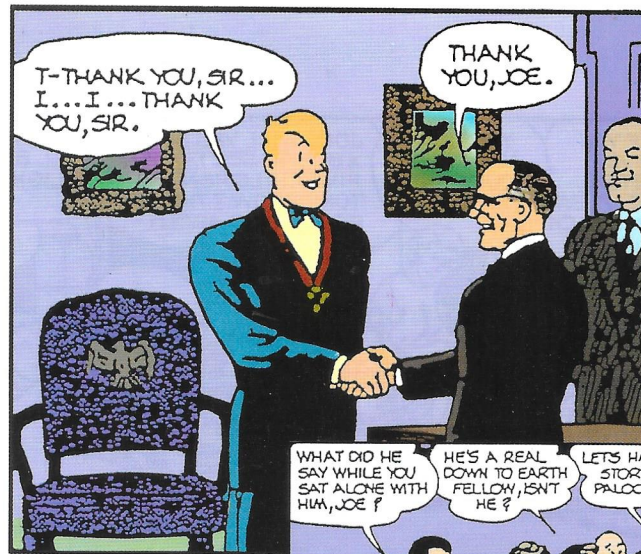
The exchange reflected Ham Fisher's ambivalence towards the war. Before December 1940, many "Palooka" episodes were decidedly isolationist, discouraging any involvement in the affairs of other nations. But with Palooka's enlistment well in advance of the draft, artist and cartoon character made up their minds to fight. It was a decision that was reinforced, subtly, time and again in the strip. "Yeah, Joe, I was an isolationist," admitted a fellow GI to Joe as they crossed German enemy lines. "I really believed I was right then."

Palooka absolves his buddy with a simple disclaimer. "A man's certainly entitled to 'is b'lifts, George."

"But when the big test came I realized how wrong I was—and that's what counts!"

Whether or not Fisher's change of heart had anything to do with his Judaism and Germany's brutal treatment of European Jews remains a subject of speculation. What is certain, however, is that Palooka's enlistment encouraged many young Americans to join up as well.

Joe Palooka and Ham Fisher immediately became the darlings of the U.S. Army. The cartoon played a major role in boosting American morale during the war, both at home and abroad. Fisher improved the boxer's image by making him more articulate, as well as more refined in his behavior and demeanor. Soon Palooka was displayed on everything from recruiting posters to a book for hospitalized veterans, *Joe Palooka*



In the late 1940s, the ever-unassuming Joe Palooka met President Harry S. Truman in the comic strip (left and below). In real life, President Truman—and Franklin Delano Roosevelt before him—thanked Palooka creator Ham Fisher for his wartime efforts.



Fights Back. The comic strip itself served a valuable purpose, educating servicemen

on the care and handling of equipment, the prevention of venereal disease, and the consequences of going AWOL. Fisher also used "Joe Palooka" to demonstrate his ideal of heroism, which was based on clean living, tolerance, and utter devotion to duty.

Called to undertake a secret and highly dangerous mission, Joe Palooka is wounded and decorated for his bravery. When offered a promotion to sergeant in March 1943, he turns it down, believing that he "did no more than any other patriotic serviceman." The sacrifice was not overlooked by President Franklin D. Roosevelt or Harry S. Truman, both of whom personally thanked the cartoonist for his wartime efforts.

Palooka's humility in refusing a commission and Fisher's constant effort to remember Wilkes-Barre in his strip paid tribute to the local men who served during World War II, especially the eighteen hundred and fifty Luzerne Countians killed in action. Fisher used the comic strip to remind Wilkes-Barre's soldiers and sailors serving overseas that their sacrifice was greatly appreciated by

the people of the Wyoming Valley.

By the war's end, "Joe Palooka" appeared in more than nine hundred newspapers in the country with a daily readership estimated at fifty million. Two more movies, *Winner Take All* and *Joe Palooka, Champ*, and a serial comic book

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were released. Fisher was earning more than a half-million dollars a year on the strip and rejected an offer of more than two million dollars for the copyrights to "Joe Palooka."

Regardless of his success, Fisher never forgot Wilkes-Barre. Not only did he return to visit family and friends, but he based characters on local personalities.

Knobby and Kitty are staying with Joannie and Buddy.. while Joe and Ann are off for a vacation!

FIRST STOP.. WILKES-BARRE, PENNSYLVANIA..



4-29

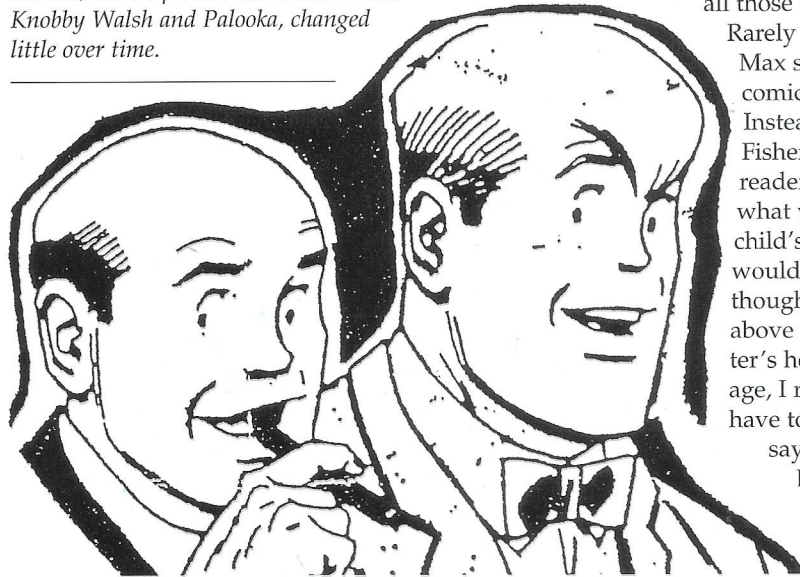
© 1949 Fisher, Inc.

Fisher
D. Fisher

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Knobby Walsh, Palooka's fast-talking fight manager, was inspired by local boxing promoter Tom Quigley. "Little Max," the shoeshine boy, was based on Max Bartikowsky, one of the children who lived in Fisher's old neighborhood. Today a respected Wilkes-Barre businessman, Bartikowsky is modest when discussing his earlier fame. "I would often dress up in my mother's floppy hats and my father's big shoes

Once fully developed by Fisher in the thirties, the strip's two main characters, Knobby Walsh and Palooka, changed little over time.



and run up and down the street," he recalled. "I guess I left an impression with Ham Fisher, who had been one of our neighbors. To be honest with you, though, I never shined shoes as a kid. But there were so many shoeshine boys on Public Square trying to make a few cents that Fisher probably made me the

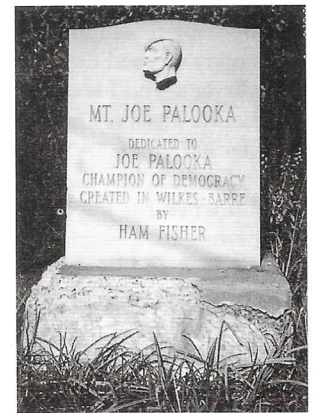
composite character for all those boys."

Rarely did Little Max speak in the comic strip. Instead, when Fisher wanted his readers to know what was on the child's mind, he would pen a thought in a bubble above the character's head. "At that age, I really didn't have too much to say," says Bartikowsky. "In fact, I was so

A triumphant return! Joe Palooka and Anne Howe visit Wilkes-Barre, Luzerne County, where the city's mayor declares "Joe Palooka Day," honoring him as a hero.

quiet that my parents often worried about me. But I guess that made me an even more attractive cartoon character for Fisher."

For Joe Palooka, 1949 was an especially good year. In April, the Wyoming Valley honored him by renaming Ashley Mountain along U.S. Route 309, "Mount Joe Palooka" and erecting a stone



It was a very good year: 1949 saw the dedication of Mt. Joe Palooka in the Wyoming Valley.

marker. Two months later, on June 24, Palooka and Ann Howe, after a courtship of eighteen years, were finally married. In October, Little Max, whose popularity had skyrocketed during his brief tenure with the strip, was featured in his own comic book, which ran for forty-three issues, until November 1961. The future would

Joe
Palooka

"Joe Palooka" was a comic strip with a message. A segment of a 1947 episode (right) depicts the hero in action, but his real enemy is not another boxer; Palooka fights arrogance, meanness, hatred, and prejudice. After a run of fifty-four years, "Joe Palooka" made its final appearance (below) on November 24, 1984, sparking newspaper articles and broadcast commentaries worldwide.



not be as bright for Hammond Fisher.

By 1955, the cartoonist's health had deteriorated. Diabetes left him near blind. His mental health was just as fragile. For months, he had been locked in a heated battle before the Federal Communications Commission with former friend and associate Al Capp, who had accused Fisher of forging some of his cartoons. Fisher became obsessed with Capp, spreading malicious gossip and lies about him and his work. He even accused his former assistant of stealing his hillbilly characters for "Li'l Abner." He doctored panels purportedly from Capp's "Li'l Abner" to render them pornographic and obscene. When Fisher was suspended from the National Cartoonists Society in January 1955 for bringing "discredit upon the Society and the entire profession of cartooning" and for "conduct unbecoming a member," he had reached breaking point. Devastated by the suspension and publicly humiliated, he spent most of the year defending himself. He grew even more depressed and struggled with chronic pain. Two days after Christmas, Ham Fisher committed suicide with an overdose of medication. Two notes were found near his body. "God will forgive me," one

By the 1980s, however, serial comic strips like "Palooka" were suffering a rapid decline in popularity. With a following of less than two hundred newspapers, it was obvious that the cartoon had lost its appeal. On Saturday, November 24, 1984, Joe Palooka fought his last round and was unceremoniously retired by the syndicate.

Through the centuries Americans have identified with heroes to define values that are important to them, both individually and collectively. To many of the fifty million newspaper readers who looked forward to Fisher's comic strip every day, Joe Palooka came to embody innocence, strength, humility, and patriotism. They especially embraced him during the turbulent World War II years, because he served as a role model to countless soldiers and their loving families at home. Joe Palooka may no longer appear in the comics sections of today's newspapers, but Ham Fisher has drawn a niche for him in the annals of cartoon history and in the legacy of Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley. ❖

William C. Kashatus, a native of Wilkes-Barre, is a regular contributor to *Pennsylvania Heritage*. He holds a bachelor of arts degree from Earlham College, a master of arts degree from Brown University, and a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania. He is director of educational programs for the Chester County Historical Society in West Chester.

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