

George Booth

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Everything but the Kitchen Sink

By R. R. Keene



Infantryman-turned-artist
SSgt George Booth was one of many talented Marines assigned to Leatherneck's art department in the 1940s and 1950s. Booth, Fred Rhoads, Fred Lasswell, Gordon Bess and Norval "Gene" Packwood were among those Marines who, after serving at Leatherneck, shed their uniforms and went on to successful careers as commercial artists.

LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

There are other George Booths out there. Maybe one of them was even a Marine, but only *The George Booth* is the bona fide gag writer and cartoonist. His art has livened up the pages of magazines from *Leatherneck* to *The New Yorker* for more than 60 years. That's not only a broad leap but an odd leap most of us never make. Because it takes ... well, talent.

"He's always had that appeal and dry humor and is possibly the funniest man I ever met," said Marine veteran and fellow artist John Chalk, who served with Booth during Booth's second tour at *Leatherneck* magazine in the early 1950s. "You'd tell him a joke, he'd laugh, break out his wallet, take out a piece of paper and write down the punch line."

His circle of literary colleagues would likely echo Amy Finch, who writing for the *Boston Phoenix* in 1999 said of Booth: "His humor is subtle and skewed, arriving without a laugh track."

Basically, Booth has always had a dry wit that appeals equally to the well-coiffed cosmopolitan dining in Manhattan and the rifle-totin' leatherneck crackin' open an MRE, or meal, ready to eat, somewhere in the desert sand of the Middle East. Booth has parodied both since the 1940s.

His work illustrates that humor in life is always there; you just have to recognize it. One of his drawings is of primor-

dial people gathered near a volcano and bent in laughter. The caption reads, "Nothing is funny. We're just having a good laugh." It is as subtle and pleasant as Booth's Missouri drawl.

This "Corn Belt" Missourian turned 81 last month and while having left Fairfax, Mo., he's never really left his roots, or his upbringing, behind.

"My dad was a no-nonsense guy. He taught school, was a gentleman, [he was] kind, and he was strong. He also entertained all of us." Booth and his father, along with his "Maw Maw" and two brothers, were a family who passed around an ability to laugh and smile at the hands life deals to ordinary people.

Booth recalled one of his father's favorite stories. "He had been a boxer in the Army and in 1919 he boxed the Navy champion. They called it a tie. He went back to the dressing room and he told the attendant: 'That was the worst beating I've ever taken in my life.' The door opened and the Navy champion came straight over and said, 'That was the worst beating I have ever took in my life.' He had a subtle sense of humor."

Growing up, George worked as a linotype operator in Sim's Print Shop until 1944 when he became old enough for the draft. He had learned to draw from his Maw Maw, who was a musician, artist and cartoonist. He had attended various

art schools but had not graduated. He did, however, draw a few cartoons for the *Fairfax Forum*, the local paper. Then the draft board sent him "Greetings." His brother Gaylord had joined the Air Force and his younger brother Jim later joined the Navy.

George decided to join the Marines. When recruiting Staff Sergeant Harry K. Bottum asked him, "What do you want to do in the Marine Corps?" George laughed, remembering, "I never really noticed there was a war going on and said I wanted to draw cartoons. Sergeant Bottum said, 'You can draw,' and as I started signing the contract, he said, 'You can draw a bead on the enemy.'

"The Marine Corps was pretty funny to me. Consequently, I got in trouble again and again." When Private Booth laughed at a fellow recruit who dropped his M1 rifle, his drill instructor, Private First Class Dan Baird, sent him double-timing at high port on marathon trips around the Parris Island, S.C., grinder. "He would have to be in his late 90s today," speculates Booth about Baird. "But, I have no doubt that he's still going strong and still chewing people out. I can still quote him word for word. Dan Baird, I love you."

Booth's recruiter, SSgt Bottum, also was a good Marine. "He'd made a note that I wanted to be a cartoonist. I've always suspected that when *Leatherneck* magazine was looking for a cartoonist, they found that little report in my record."

The offer to join the *Leatherneck* staff, which was made up of active-duty Marines, came to him in Hawaii where in 1946 he was an infantryman with the Fourth Marine Division. "I didn't get into combat. I was a replacement for the guys coming back from Iwo Jima." According to Booth, the offer was typical of the Corps in that it was good, "provided I reenlist."

He thought hard. "I didn't like the Marine Corps very much at that point. I did reenlist, and it was a great opportunity." He would do two separate tours at *Leatherneck* from 1946 to 1948 and from 1950 to 1952.

The *Leatherneck* art department had acquired some of the best young talent in the nation. Between World War II and



Nadine and Ed



"Not right this second, 'Pussycat,' but I would like to hear your thinking on the international terrorism thing."

Booth created this 1951 cover (left) and went on to even greater successes. He remembers that it was the Marines who gave him his chance. He is giving back with a new series of cartoons, "Nadine and Ed," an unlikely pairing of a Marine, Ed, and his camel, Nadine. "Leatherneck Laffs" (pages 30-31) features an exclusive first look at Booth's latest humor.

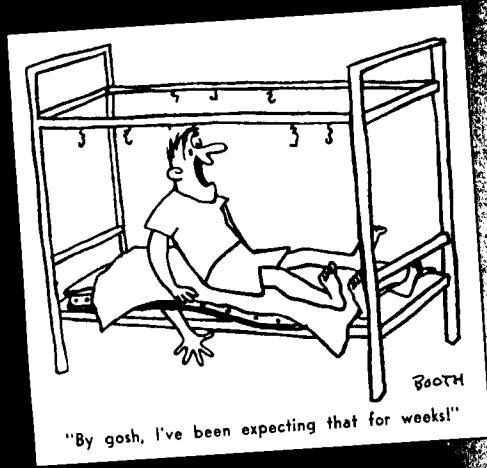
the Korean War, Marines with names such as Fred Rhoads who later inked "Sad Sack," Fred Lasswell who did "Barney Google and Snuffy Smith," Gordon Bess who drew "Redeye," Norval Packwood who did "Leatherhead," and Karl Hubenthal who became a sports cartoonist for the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* were just a few. Booth said, "At *Leatherneck* most people had done something worthwhile, and the only thing I had done was burn an outhouse on Maui."

John Chalk, then a sergeant and now a successful commercial artist and sculptor, said: "Yes, there was lots of talent. The art department was putting out the magazine, but no one had a serious thought in their head."

Booth hit his stride as a cartoonist while at *Leatherneck*. "I had found a way to poke fun at the Marine Corps. You have this huge authority hanging over your head and you're a peon, a lowly private. So it's funny if the little guy can,



They were the Missouri Booths, and the family had a talent for humor and art. It was George's "Maw Maw," Norene (center), who was a musician, artist and cartoonist. Such talents were passed on to the three boys, George (left), Jim (right) and Gaylord (not pictured).



once in awhile, put his finger up and poke a hole in that authority."

The art department at *Leatherneck* only had to look to themselves for ideas. Booth laughed, remembering Corporal Chuck Graves from Kansas City. "Chuck left *Leatherneck* and said he wanted something to remember me by so he cut my field scarf with a pair of scissors about two inches from the neck. I ran into him again in Lexington, Kentucky. By then he was the founder of the Kentucky School of Architecture. He was no longer Chuck Graves. He was C. Parker Graves!"

Sometimes Booth went to great lengths to pull off a gag. Commercial artist and former Corporal Chuck Beveridge said, "George did nothing but cartoons. When he illustrated a story it was in cartoon style. He did a cover for the July 1951 issue. The line drawing was of a Marine down in the corner swinging his rifle and scattering Koreans and Chinese all over

'Steve Canyon' comic strip."

Beveridge remembers Booth selling a few of his drawings. "In those days, some publications like *The New Yorker* would pay \$60 to \$70 a piece. That was a lot of money for a cartoon."

In the meantime, life, work and antics at *Leatherneck*'s art department, located in Washington, D.C., at 14th Street and New York Avenue, went on. The staff creatively worked hard and played hard, although it was often difficult for the untrained eye to tell the difference.

Beveridge said Booth saved money by hitchhiking back to his home. "He got a plastic see-through clothing protector with a hangar and put his dress blues in where they could be seen and he could get a ride easier. He made record time between New York and Missouri.

"Christmas was coming and I asked George, 'Are you going home for Christmas?' His response was 'No.' " Beveridge, who lived in Alexandria, Va., said, "I'll check with my mom and maybe you can come over to my house for Christmas dinner. George said, 'That would be great.'

"I called him that night and said, 'George, Mom said we'd love to have you for Christmas.' As a parting shot I said, 'Bring the whole family.' He said 'OK.' At about 7:30 Christmas morning, George called saying, 'Can you pick me up at about 10 o'clock this morning?' 'Why so early?' I asked. George said, 'You said bring the whole family, and my mom and brother are coming in on a plane. I'd like to pick them up at the airport.'

SSgt George Booth left the Corps in 1952 and headed for New York. He used his GI Bill to attend the School of Visual Arts in New York. He got married. Like a lot of artists, he struggled. His professional career started with *Collier's* magazine in 1960. He also was published in *Look* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. He made his first sale with *The New Yorker* in 1969 and has been doing cartoons for them since.

His work has earned him what some might see as impressive awards: Honorary Ph.D. (Doctor of Fine Arts) from New York State University at Stony Brook in 2003, Honorary Member of Colgate Graduate Class of 1939, awarded in 2003. He also doesn't often mention his first-degree black belt in judo (Kodokan), which he earned in 1986, but he does take pride in showing off his Certificate of Merit from Fairfax High School Alumni Class of '04.

He's done several books: "Pussy Cats Need Love, Too!" "Rehearsal's Off!"

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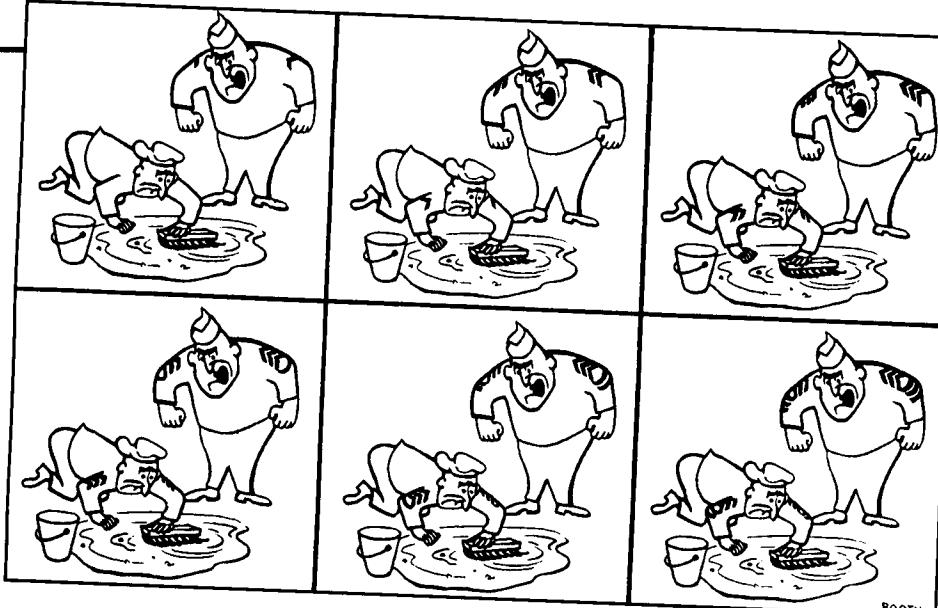


George Booth, in this 1990s photo, still laughs at his own jokes, and because most of them are funny, people laugh with him. Booth lives on Long Island, N.Y., with his wife, Dione. They have a daughter, Sara, who has worked with the *New York Times* for 10 years. George has no plans to slow down, as long as he can still find something to laugh about.

the cover. Everything was flying away.

"I said, 'George, you got everything on that cover but the kitchen sink.' He didn't say anything; he just pointed to the top right-hand corner and there was the kitchen sink."

Booth wanted to be a cartoonist more than he wanted to be a career Marine. He sent his cartoons to various publications and had a drawer full of rejection slips. "I did that cover, and it caught their attention. I even got a note from Milton Caniff [the creator and artist for the



"Booth Again!" and "Omnibooth," which are collections of his work with *The New Yorker*. "The Essential George Booth," compiled and edited by Lee Lorenz, art editor of *The New Yorker*, is a collection of Booth's art and a biography.

Booth also is very proud of his illustrations for several children's books: "Possum Come a-Knockin'" by Nancy Van Laan, "Never Tease a Weasel" by Jean Conder Soule, and "Wacky Wednesday" by Dr. Seuss. The latter two, which were done several years ago, are currently back in print.

He says with his Missouri drawl: "I'm big city now!"

It is true. He and his wife, Dione, live on Long Island, N.Y., but his doodler's style still features the everyday man in everyday situations.

"Working with Marines at *Leatherneck* and people at *The New Yorker* was similar. You're in creative work. You got to apply yourself and have something to show."

He says that there's a tendency in the corporate world for "people to get a puffed-up idea of themselves."

He admits, "I still get fresh with people." But he says that when he runs into a former Marine, "Eyes light up, we shake hands and just kind of laugh with one another. There's camaraderie and there's Semper Fi."

Booth is a man who always has liked to laugh. He doesn't have any plans to stop inking cartoons and gags that make people laugh, and he likes to laugh at his own comments. His humor is compared with fellow Missourian Mark Twain. Booth likes that. It is a favorite topic.

"My father's mother was named Clem-mands before she married. Once I hitch-

hiked to Hannibal, Mo., and went to the Mark Twain Library. I asked the older lady who was the librarian, 'Is there any connection between my family, which is C L E M M A N D S, and Sam Clemens?' She said, 'Oh, yes, it's all the same bunch. They spelled it eight different ways.'

"I was recently asked to talk at the Saint Nicholas Society in Manhattan, and their membership interest is in genealogy.

I told them I wasn't interested in my genealogy because my ancestors go back to the Flys, Cherokee Indians who died on the "Trail of Tears." I don't know much about the Fly family except that they must have been in trouble.

"Then there's the Swindles. My grandfather and grandmother Swindle ran a bank in south Missouri that went bust and Uncle Crook had worked in that bank one summer.

"Then, my dad in the early 1940s checked the Archives in Washington, D.C., because we were always asked if we were related to John Wilkes Booth. He came back from Washington and said, 'Yes, we're related to Edwin Booth, but we are not related to his brother John Wilkes.'

"And on my grandmother Swindle's side, her name was Mary Ford Swindle. It was Robert Ford of the Ford brothers in St. Joe, Mo., who shot Jesse James. So I said [to the genealogists of the Saint Nicholas Society], if there was any credit to be had from the Clemens family, I don't want any part of it because if I take that, then, I'm going to have to answer for the Flys and the Swindles and the Booths and the Crooks and that dirty little coward Robert Ford who shot Jesse James in the back!"



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