The old man shows up in the center of a nine-panel Sunday cartoon. (The strip would have arrived in Sunday newspapers in glorious color, but it left Mr. Eisman’s drawing board, and entered his collection, in black ink.) “There goes Mr. Geezil,” Popeye muses, as he watches the old man go by. We see Popeye from behind, his sailor’s hat, corn cob pipe, jutting chin, and prominent muscles instantly recognizable. “I ain’t seen ‘im in years,” Popeye says. “I didn’t like him,” Mr. Eisman said, explaining Mr. Geezil’s long absence from Popeye’s neighborhood. As longtime Popeye readers might know, Mr. Geezil is a Russian Jewish immigrant, complete with a stereotyped accent and a job as a pawnbroker.

Mr. Eisman has been drawing the Sunday Popeye comic strip since 1997. (The weekday strip has been in reruns since then.) As he talks about Mr. Geezil, it’s clear the insult inherent in the character is personal for Mr. Eisman, the son of Polish Jewish immigrants. Mr. Eisman grew up in Paterson, speaking Yiddish. (Polish was the language they spoke to each other when they didn’t want their children to understand.) Mr. Eisman didn’t learn English until he started school. His mother learned it with him. His father never did.

George W. Geezil was created by Elzie Crisler Segar, the cartoonist who first created Popeye as a bit character in his popular comic strip, “Thimble Theater.” Mr. Geezil first appeared in 1932. Popeye first showed up on January 17, 1929. And yes, that means that Popeye is turning 90 next month. Mr. Eisman first brought back Mr. Geezil as part of a reunion to celebrate Popeye’s 75th birthday in 2004. He already has finished his
celebratory 90th anniversary strip and mailed it to Kings Feature Syndicate, Popeye’s owner and his employer. This one features a reproduction of Popeye’s first appearance. Mr. Geenl does not appear.

With Popeye about to turn 90, it seems a good opportunity to visit with Mr. Eisman, who is older than the spinach-eating sailor, but not by much: He is 91.

Hyman Eisman was 5 when he first met Popeye. He was living in Daughter’s of Miriam, the Clifton orphanage that later morphed into a nursing home, then. It was 1932, and the Great Depression was underway. Hyman’s father had lost his job as a weaver in Paterson’s silk industry. His mother was hospitalized with tuberculosis. His aunt, who had cared for him and his brother and housed the family, had to sell the apartment building where they all lived. Yet the gloomy stay at the orphanage had one bright technicolor redemptive virtue: On Sunday, visitors would bring the Sunday papers, with their colorful comic strip sections.

Hyman had never seen such wonders before. At home, his parents had gotten the Yiddish Forverts.

“New York had eight papers on a Sunday,” Mr. Eisman said. “All of them had different comics.”

“It’s hard to recapture the intensity comic strips offered then. ‘They were in color, when nothing else was in color, not even magazines,’ he said. The real world of the Depression course was not in the black and white of our media-formed memories, but the media world actually was in black and white back then.

There was not the real world. There was the black-and-white world of print and movie screen, and then there were the comics, a beacon of color.

“I lived for Sundays,” Mr. Eisman said. “It took me out of the misery of being there. I felt alive again.”

He would ration out the fun, saving his favorite strips for last. He still can visualize the bright pages, remembering which strip appeared where in which paper. “Popeye was in the front of the Mirror,” he remembers.

There’s another, earlier memory, from back when he was still living in Paterson, before the orphanage, of when Hyman first met a drawing desk. One of the neighbors in the six-family apartment building was an animator. “I wandered into his house. He let me watch him. I watched him drawing. He was at work.”

With Hyman’s visual imagination sparked by the comics, “I would draw on everything. I would get into trouble. In school, we had these chairs with a table built in. I would draw on that and they caught me. I would draw on anything I could grab.

“Some teachers were wise enough to put me at the blackboard to draw stuff for the holidays. I would produce big full-color stuff with chalk. It occupied me. ‘Other teachers would call my mother into school. They’d say, ‘He sits and draws all day.’ My mother would say, ‘He wants to be a cartoonist.’ ‘Don’t worry,’ the teachers told her. ‘He’ll grow out of it.’”

Spoiler: He didn’t.

He did, for a time, grow out of his given name, Hyman. Hyman was, back in the day, an all-purpose English equivalent for the hard-to-pronounce and harder-to-spell Yiddish Chaim. It also, as he learned to his chagrin in grammar school, had a gynecomastia.

So Hyman Eisman became Herman Eisman.

Until, that is, it was time to go to the army.

There, he would become Hyman Eisman again, Jewish name and all.

Or so was the plan.

“I ended up in Camp Blanding, in Florida, with a bunch of southerners.

“During the Jewish holidays, a guy came to the hut where we slept and banged on the door. The oldest guy let him in.

“He asked, ‘Are there any Jewish soldiers here? There’s a bus going into Jacksonville for services.’

“The guy in my hut said, ‘There ain’t no Jews here.’”

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The way he enunciated Jews convinced Hyman not to volunteer his identity. “I better just be Private Eisman,” he said. “It was that way until I got out of the hut. The whole place was loaded with guys from Georgia and North Florida. One guy was 16 years old – he faked his age, because he would make more sending home his army pay. Another guy said: ‘I hit some guy upside the head with an axe and now I can draw better than that cartoonist, so he contributed his own strip to the paper.’ That other cartoonist went on to make his mark as a publisher rather than an artist: It was Hugh Hefner.

Released from the army, Mr. Eisman decided to use his G.I. Bill funding to go to art school; he lived in Paterson but knew he’d have to commute to New York. He considered the Art League’s school in Manhattan. Mr. Eisman was determined to take a classical anatomy class because as much as he laughed over Popeye, his eye was most taken by Hal Foster’s realistic drawings in another comic strip, Prince Valiant.

The Art League offered that class.

The problem, however, was that former G.I.s who were discharged before he was already filled the Art League’s classes. The anatomy class had a two-year backlog of would-be students.

(Today, the once-transient beauty of newspaper strips has been captured in full-color full-broadsheet-size reproductions from publishers like Fantagraphics. Mr. Eisman opens a volume of Prince Valiant reprints to delightedly point out the quality of Mr. Foster’s illustrations.)

Next, Mr. Eisman looked into the new Cartoonists and Illustrators School that just started up in Manhattan, fueled by the G.I. Bill tuition payments. “It was the first place I ever saw original cartoons hanging on the wall,” he said. That was a draw. The downside was downstairs, the school was above a stable for police horses and he could smell its stairs.
neighbors in the classroom. “This place will never make it,” he decided, and looked elsewhere. Without him, the school moved on from the stable and grew into the School of Visual Arts; some of its graduates went on to help create Mad Magazine and Spider-Man.

So he found the Art Career School – it wasn’t too crowded and it didn’t have horses – in the Flatiron Building, on Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue at 23rd Street. Today Mr. Eisman has pictures of the triangular building pinned to a bulletin board in his studio. His desk, on the top floor, was at the triangle’s apex.

He studied there from 1947 to 1950, taking the Susquehanna Railroad under the Hudson. He learned commercial illustration – “A lot of renderings of beer bottles with sweat” – and hand lettering. “A lot of the typefaces I designed have been turned into computer fonts,” he said.

He got his first job drawing Valentine cards and the packages they came in. “They found a way of printing on a transparent package so you could see the cards inside,” he said. “I would do the design they would print on top of them. They distributed their stuff to Sears, to five-and-tens. They wanted a different logo on every package.”

The card company offered him a full-time job. He declined. “I said to the guy, if I ate regularly, I would never be able to go into what I wanted to do” – which was draw comic books.

As a freelance artist, he would earn $25 for each package design. “I would do three of those a day. I would do those and then spend a lot of time doing comic books, for $7.50 a page.” He could pencil in only about two pages a day, he said.

Hy Eisman’s local take on Ripley’s Believe It or Not! ran in the Newark Evening News from 1954 to 1957.
As he started to get more of a foothold in the comic book business, the business started going into decline. You might blame the rise of television in the mid-1950s for this. Mr. Eisman blames psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham, whose 1954 book “The Seduction of the Innocent” blamed comic books for a wide range of social ills. Senator Estes Kefauver (D-Tenn) turned the focus of his televised hearings on crime and juvenile delinquency toward comic books.

“I would be walking around New York with my portfolio,” Mr. Eisman remembered. “I would sit back in front of the TV at night and that was the only thing on. As I walked around every week there was one less comic book company.”

He came up with an idea for a newspaper strip: “It Happened in New Jersey.” It borrowed the font and the tone from Ripley’s Believe It or Not. The News had other ideas: They insisted on exclusivity. So it didn’t make him rich, “but it was stuff I wanted to do.”

Around this time he met his first wife, Adri Abramson. She was a book jacket designer and letterer (and her business card read Adri Ames, for obvious reasons).

“She was doing better than I did but she was willing to get married,” he said. “She had an elevator apartment at the corner of 17th Street and Irving Place. I said, for that $90 a month she was paying in rent, we could get six rooms in Paterson. She agreed. It was the dumbest move I ever made.”

The move, that is. Not the marriage. The couple had two daughters, Merle and Mindy. In 1960, after Merle was born, the family moved to Glen Rock and joined the Jewish Center there. Adri supported Hy’s comic strip dreams, even advising him to turn down a full-time job as an editor for Gold Key Comics that came with health insurance. She continued to work as a book designer.

He developed a reputation for reliability,
“My first comic books were ghosting other people’s work. Whenever someone was going on vacation or needed to bring their stuff up to where the deadline was, they would call me.” At least once, a job he thought was helping out a fellow artist actually was set up by the comic strip syndicate to prove to the artist that he was expendable, and push back against a request for higher pay.

In the early 1960s, he tried to launch his own comic strip with writer Zachary Ball, based on Ball’s series of Joe Panther books for teenage boys. “It was a series about Joe Panther, a Seminole Indian in Florida. His books were all about the Seminoles. He came up with this idea of Joe Panther coming into Miami as a private detective. It was Miami Vice years before Miami Vice.”

“We peddled it around New York. United Features was very interested. They picked it up. Then they got back to us. They said the strip did very well in the North. But there were a lot of papers in the South that would not pick up a strip with Indians dealing with white people. Could you put him back in the village like he was in the book?”

All this work was on spec.

Mr. Ball and Mr. Eisman remade the strip, now set in the Seminole village. “We did a number of pencils. I inked a whole week and a Sunday page. United Features loved it.”

Then they started talking contract terms.

“They explained something that I never knew...”

While the Private Secretary romance comic only lasted for two issues, Hy Eisman found steady work with Archie Comics for many years.
before. That a contract with a cartoon syndicate is 50/50, after expenses. Expenses include the building on 42nd Street, that guys that go out and peddle the strip, paying for lunches for editors, and so forth. It could be a long time before there could be any revenue."

That’s when Mr. Eisman learned the story of Charles Schulz, who didn’t see any money from Peanuts for 19 months. “He was living on a couch in Mort Walker’s house while he was waiting for the strip to be sold,” Mr. Eisman said. Mr. Eisman then understood why he had seen one-page Charlie Brown cartoons in the Nancy comic book Mr. Eisman drew for a while. “Schulz was getting $17.50 for that page. That was his income.”

“Ouch!”

“So we had to pass. That’s how close I came to doing my own stuff.”

Around this time he drew his single most valuable cartoon panel. It was a page from Private Secretary – a romance comic that lasted all of two issues. He made about $17 for the page, which comes to $3 for the panel. That wasn’t a lot of money. One person who saw the comic, however, was Roy Lichtenstein. Some 40 years later, an art instructor named David Barsalou set out to find the source materials used by Mr. Lichtenstein for his pop-art paintings. He determined that “Girl in a Window,” which hangs in the Whitney museum and last sold for $30 million, was based on Mr. Eisman’s drawing.

“I ghosted for Roy Lichtenstein,” Mr. Eisman says with a laugh.

For Merle and Mindy Eisman, having a father who drew comic books had its perks.

“We were doing a comic book about a doll called Bunny Ball,” Mr. Eisman said. “A toy company had made it as a competitor to Barbie. The doll never took off but the comic book took off. I was doing the comic book for 17 years. In 1987 he was hired to take over the Sunday strips for the Katzenjammer Kids, the oldest continuing-running comic strip. (It started in 1897.) The strips featured acccents that were much more accessible to children in the late 19th and early 20th century, when German immigration was high, than they were in the 1980s. He continued with the strip until it went into permanent reruns in 2006.

In 1997, Adri died. They had been married for 42 years. His second wife, Florenz Greenberg, died in 2013.

Popeye, however, lives on.

“After 90 years there are certain things about the strip that everybody know,” Mr. Eisman said. “Wimpe likes hamburgers. Wimpe thinks he’s God’s gift to women. Olive Oyl, Brutus, that kind of thing. Essentialy I’m rewriting gags and coming up with different approaches to it. It’s 90 years. I’m locked into what this guy can do."

“He eats spinach. He punches people.”

Which isn’t to say that nothing changes. In one recent strip, Wimpe brings his lady-killer confidence to the realm of online dating. Another strip mentioned climate change.

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Cover Story

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David Barsalou connected the dots between a $30 million Roy Lichtenstein and the $3 Hy Eisman panel that inspired it.
At 91, Mr. Eisman relies on his daughters to double check the terminology for the technology he uses in the strip. He is one of the last holdouts against drawing on a computer. “Technology to me is going to Mail & More, making a copy of the strip, and mailing it down to Orlando,” he said.

The Orlando office of King Feature scans the art and emails it to a colorist in Ohio. Now, coloring is done in Photoshop. Back in the day, however, it took two women working full time to color Prince Valiant’s weekly Sunday outing.

“My check comes out of North Carolina,” Mr. Eisman said. “It’s all over the place. When I started you had to live in New York, North Jersey, or Connecticut. It’s a different world. I don’t know if there’s another guy still working in pen and ink.

“I’m in a position where my parents were – I’m in a country I don’t know anything about,” he said. He learned the hard way the truth of the internet adage, “don’t read the comments.”

“I made the mistake of looking at the comments. People will troll you no matter what you do. One guy didn’t like my drawing because I put the anchor on Popeye’s arm on the wrong spot. Another guy complained the drawing wasn’t the way Cegar or Bud Sagendorf – the guy I replaced – drew it. My stuff has slowly become more illustrative, slightly less cartoony. It’s very hard to draw badly if you know anatomy. I eventually started changing the proportions to make it more normal. Someone complained I’m drawing badly. They want that old-time look.”

What counts is that King Features likes what he does. With Popeye’s 90th birthday coming up in January, the syndicate is looking to promote the sailor. It’s been a long time since the classic black-and-white Popeye cartoons that played in theaters starting in the 1930s, or the color cartoons that were on TV in the ‘60s. Now they’re bringing him online.

“Kids don’t read newspapers,” Mr. Eisman. For 40 years, he taught at the Kubert School in Dover, founded by his friend, the cartoonist Joe Kubert, which teaches cartooning and illustration. When he turned 90, his daughters asked him to stop. “My last couple of months teaching at the school, I had to bring in physical newspapers when I was teaching about the Sunday cartoons. The students didn’t know what I was talking about.”

Only a handful of newspapers in the United States still run Popeye. “Most of the papers still carrying it are in the Midwest,” he said. All the pipe-smoking doesn’t play well with younger editors. “It’s very big in South America and in Spain, in Sweden and in Germany.”

He has toned down the violence. “I do one or two fights a year,” he said.

Mr. Eisman has created new characters in his decades on the strip. The cutest is Chester, Popeye’s dog. (Early on, when the strip was considerably weirder, under its original creator, there was a magical dog-like animal called Eugene the Jeep, whose name ended up on the World War II army vehicle.) Chester is named after the hometown of Popeye’s creator, Mr. Segar – Chester, Illinois. Chester celebrates Popeye with an annual picnic and has put statues of various Popeye characters along its Mississippi River frontage. Mr. Eisman recently was asked to send sketches of Chester the dog to artisans in China, who will create a statue there. Chester and Eugene are scheduled to be placed in front of the Chester Firehouse on State Street sometime next year.

But there are no plans to honor Mr. Geezil with a statue in Chester.