



Episode 12, Pete Gray Cartoon, Baltimore and New York City

Elyse Luray: Our next story investigates a baseball legend and turns a page in comic book history. In the 1940's, comics were experiencing a golden age, featuring primary colors, thrilling plots and the adventures of heroes with superhuman powers. Americans were devouring as many as 10 million comic books a month. At just 10 cents an issue, these tidy stories of villains and the crime fighters who vanquished them were bought mostly by children and young adults. More than half a century after this golden age, Richard Arenas of Brooklyn, New York, has made a curious discovery. What appear to be the original drawings for a 1940's comic book with an apparently true life storyline about a one-armed baseball player. The story seems quite different from the kid stuff of its day.

Richard Arenas: I collect mostly baseball cards, comic books. What caught my eye was it was a baseball player. And I really liked it a lot.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray and I'm dropping in on Richard to take a look at his comic art. Where'd you find it?

Richard: In a little antique store. The guy had this and when I seen that this was original artwork on a baseball player I got excited and I wanted to buy it.

Elyse: The artwork tells the story of Pete Gray who played baseball in the major leagues during the 1940's, despite having only one arm. Is it the complete story?

Richard: Yeah. There's five boards here and then it tells the whole story that's in. That's featured in the Picture News.

Elyse: Online, Richard was able to track down the comic itself, which was called "Picture News". There it is. Yeah. And it's completely matching. That's great. You have the complete story, and it's original comic art.

Richard: Right.

Elyse: What can I tell you?

Richard: I wanted to find out who the artist was.

Elyse: And Richard has another question – Pete Gray may have had a heroic story, but he was a flesh and blood mortal and so perhaps an odd choice for a comic.



Richard: Back then there was a lot of superheroes they made in the comic books. So I was curious to know why they would feature a real person in a comic.

Elyse: Do you mind if I take the artwork with me so I can study it?

Richard: Yeah, sure.

Elyse: Okay. The first thing I can definitely tell you from my years of experience at Christies and just being in the pop culture appraising world, that these are original artwork. This is very indicative to what paper would look like in the 1940's. The way that it's inked, the style, everything about it is right on. The panels match the comic book, meaning they were almost certainly the final illustrations reproduced at printing in 1946. The comic states that Gray went from Memphis to the St. Louis Browns in 1945 and played at baseball's biggest venues. 39,000 fans cheered him at Yankee Stadium, right here in New York. Anybody would love to do that. What I don't know is if some of the details here correspond with the actual events of his life. Like the accident which apparently injured him in childhood. And there's this panel, which asserts Gray visited veteran's hospitals and became a living legend to wounded GI's. There's no mark or signature that may lead me to a potential artist. No clue who created it, so that's going to be a tough one. And Richard's other question is a good one. The entire issue of the comic deals with real life stories. It looks like it's a bunch of stories about things that actually were taking place at the time. This is something about somebody being rescued in a railroad. Who was the audience for Picture News? Kids or adults? At the Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art in New York City, I'm hunting for any references to Picture News. Ah, Picture News, 172 and....It seems that Richard's comic occupied a unique place in comic book history. "The oddest of all the factual comics was Picture News, an attempt to produce a comic book newspaper. The courageous but doomed experiment lasted nine issues, collectable today only for its curiosity value – and its pages of cartoon comment on current events by the veteran newspaper humorist, Milt Gross." Could Milt Gross be out mystery artist? So that's one name. As an appraiser, I frequently check price guides which tell you about how much collectibles are worth, but sometimes include additional information. Here it is. "Picture News featuring comic book stories based on actual news events of the day." At the bottom here, it lists who some of the writers are and it gives me different names for artists. One is Milt Gross, the other is Bernie Krigstein. I want to compare their artwork to Richard's drawing. So let's start with the Gross. Oh, they're definitely not the same artist. I can tell immediately, Milt Gross' artwork looks very cartoony. It's more gag looking. Okay, let's look at Krigstein. Well, his characters definitely look more human. His figures are not as full, they're thinner. Just judging from the composition of his overall work, I would say that Krigstein did not draw the Pete Gray comic. So, that leaves me drawing a blank. I'm in Baltimore. It's my hometown and a baseball Mecca. Hi Steve.

Steve Geppi: Hi Elyse. How you doing? Good to see you.



Elyse: Steve Geppi is a minority owner of the Baltimore Orioles and the largest English language distributor of comic books. At Geppi's Entertainment Museum at Camden Yard, his comic collection tells the history of the medium's golden age. These are pictures of original artwork and I'm hoping if you could help me, I'm trying to figure out who the artist is.

Steve: A very good artist, whoever he is. Without doing a little bit of research, I'd have a hard...be hard pressed to identify who he is.

Elyse: Ironically, while their work reached millions, Steve says little of the golden age artist's work was actually signed.

Steve: It was not prestigious to be a comic book artist in those days, because comics were looked down upon. They were not considered to be high-end artistic work.

Elyse: He tells me how the Second World War had increased adult readership of comics. During those blood years, fictional heroes like Superman, Captain America and Batman literally illustrated American power and offered comfort to those serving far from home. An estimated 90 percent of all reading matter in Army camps was comic books.

Steve: Yeah, originally they were targeted for children, but as the sales occurred they started to find out who was really reading them and it wasn't just children.

Elyse: And that trend continued after the war. With much of the American public reading at a sixth grade level in the early 1940's, publishers wanted to keep their increasingly adult audience.

Steve: People started to recognize comics for their educational potential, so they start to experiment with titles like Picture News and Classics Illustrated and Picture Stories from The Bible. They started to use them as teaching aids and trying to show people...real live people could be superheroes.

Elyse: Steve shows me an editor's letter printed in the very first issue of Picture News.

Steve: "The leading comic book characters personify the energy, dash, unbeatable spirit and the pure motives of our American ideal. Picture News for the first time uses this new medium" – talking about comics – "of action pictures and color and dialogue to make life real on the printed page.

Elyse: This is Richard's copy of Picture News. But here's the story of Pete Gray. Is this an accurate telling of the Pete Gray Story?



Steve: I honestly didn't know a lot about Pete Gray. I'll tell you what, my interest is certainly peaked at this point now having learned a little bit about him. Especially now that I know he appeared in a comic book and hope to learn more about him.

Elyse: All right. Well, I guess that's what I'm off to do next. I'm meeting Pete Gray's biographer, William Kashatus, at Oriole Park at Camden Yards. He knew Pete Gray and I want to know if our comic art got Pete's story straight. How does he become a professional player?

William Kashatus: World War II really paved the way for Pete Gray's major league career. You had many star players like Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams who enlisted in the military and the quality of the major leagues were down. And so you had teams like the St. Louis Browns who really wanted to have an attraction in order to get people to the gate. Pete became one of those attractions.

Elyse: That's interesting. The comic says nothing about the quality of wartime baseball being down. How was he able to even play baseball with one arm?

William: He had a very creative technique. What he would do was after he would catch the ball, he'd take it, remove the glove under the stump of his arm, roll the ball across his chest and throw it back into the infield.

Elyse: Bill shows me photos of Pete Gray in action and they look very much like the images in Richard's art.

William: He probably caught a fly ball on this picture, because you could see the glove underneath his right stump.

Elyse: Right.

William: If he fielded the ball off the ground, what he would do is he'd field it with the glove, throw the ball up in the air like this and as he was throwing it, he'd just shed the glove on the ground and then return it into the infield.

Elyse: And his face is filled with determination.

William: Oh, very much so. Yeah, you can see that.

Elyse: I have this comic book here, Picture News. Do you think he is portrayed accurately in this comic book?

William: The cartoon does read fairly accurately in terms of his throwing style, in terms of how he lost the arm and what he did with it.



Elyse: The story has a heroic quality. But, the truth was more complex.

William: It is a true story. It's a rather synthesized one. It makes him out to be the hero, that he'd have some problems with.

Elyse: Bill thinks he knows why our comic tells only part of the Pete Gray story, and the reference to him visiting injured GI's is our clue. More than 600,000 servicemen and women have been wounded during World War II. The war department seized on Pete's inspirational story and he made many appearances at Army hospitals. But some of this publicity upset him.

William: I think that the sports writers wanted to make him into a hero, but Pete was very uncomfortable with that. He thought that heroism belonged on the battlefield, not on the baseball diamond.

Elyse: How did he feel about being called the one-arm wonder?

William: He was upset about it because he wanted to be respected for his natural talent as a player and he didn't want to be looked on as a freak or a curiosity item.

Elyse: In his only season with the Browns, Pete Gray had a .218 batting average and no home runs. When the war ended in 1945, he was released from his contract and sent back to the minors.

William: He felt rather bitter about his major league career. He felt that major league baseball had used him and then forgotten about him. He fought some losing battles with gambling and alcohol.

Elyse: So the Picture News comic was really an exaggeration of the Pete Gray story. And that kind of makes sense, because he became a hero to World War II veterans. But, I still have no idea who drew this comic book. Ron Goulart is an author of several books on comic history. I'm meeting him at Midtown Comics in New York City. Earlier I emailed him digital photos of Richard's drawings. So I guess the first question is do you recognize the artist? Ron had dug deep into his childhood memory and rummaged through the artwork of the little known illustrators of the golden age.

Ron Goulart: When I was a youth, many, many decades ago, I bought...I had every issue of Picture News...

Elyse: Ron thinks he knows who our artist is.

Ron: I've got some stuff that I scanned from my vast collection.



Elyse: He points out similarities in these comics in our Picture News.

Ron: Now here's this guy. It's almost the standard face. He's got the teeth.

Elyse: Yeah.

Ron: He's got a square face.

Elyse: Uh huh.

Ron: And you'll notice the way he even does men's hair. Same way he does the hair here.

Elyse: And the cheekbones, I can tell.

Ron: This is a fellow named Harry Anderson. And he goes back to the starting comics in the late 30s and dropped out in the early 50s. This is about the middle of his period.

Elyse: Ron says Harry Anderson was a typical golden age artist – talented, but unsung. Ron also helps with another mystery. Why had Picture News vanished after only a handful of issues? He explains that during the golden age there had been a backlash against comics' often violent content.

Ron: A lot of people thought it was too stimulating; Superman and Batman and Captain Marvel jumping around. There would always be a story about a kid who thought he was superman and jumped out the window. By the late 1940's they are burning comic books and having boy scouts out there burning comic books because they were so terrible....

Elyse: Eventually, congressional hearings led to restrictions on the book's contents. What Ron tells me next explains why Richard's artwork is a window on the final moments of the golden age of comics. I tell Richard how the Harry Anderson who drew his cartoons had been a typical artist of the golden age – unsung and virtually anonymous.

Richard: Doesn't ring a bell to me.

Elyse: During that time period, being a comic artist was not a very prestigious job. It was almost like a job you took until you could get another job. But while Anderson himself hadn't been celebrated, his work on Picture News told an important story. Every historian that I talked to felt that your comic art was an important historical document, because it represented what was going on in America. The cartoon was an effort to inspire young men who had been horribly changed by World War II and to deal with the criticism that comics had become too



violent. Yet, in much the same way that turning Pete Gray into a hero had irritated him, the sanitized reporting of Picture News hadn't been a hit with readers either. The golden age was ending.

Ron: Another thing that's on the horizon just about this time is television, which is going to kill a lot of, you know, take away the audience, because people are going to look at television and they're not going to have time to read comic books, or read anything else for a while.

Elyse: Although Pete Gray had struggled with his media image, in later life he came to realize how he'd helped some veterans find the courage to confront their injuries.

William: In his last years, when he was in his late 70s and 80s, when he was received by fans all across the country in such a heartwarming way, he started to see that he had an important role to play. And he did become a hero, especially for many servicemen coming back from the battlefield as amputees.

Richard: I bought it for baseball itself. But, you know, after having it for like all these years, you know, you read more about somebody like him and you do, you feel closer to it.

Elyse: Pete Gray died in 2002 at the age of 87.