

History of Political Cartoons Examined By Staff Member From Library of Congress

By LINDA COMINS
Life Editor

Speaking at the Ohio County Public Library in Wheeling, Library of Congress staff member Warren Bernard observed that political cartoons "could move people's emotions and their votes."

Bernard, who lives in Bethesda, Md., opened the People's University course on cartoon history Tuesday, Aug. 27. He has cataloged more than 1,300 cartoons at the Library of Congress.

Discussing public reaction to political cartoons, he said cartoonists had "much greater freedom of expression in old cartoons, regardless of whether they came from the left or the right." Now, when controversial topics are explored, "cartoonists today get death threats and mail. It's more difficult to put these images out there. You get this violent response," Bernard commented.

Showing examples of similar themes depicted decades apart, he remarked, "These old cartoon images don't necessarily remain dormant."

While political cartoons existed earlier, "we have to start with Thomas Nast for what American political cartooning is today," Bernard said. Nast worked for Harper's Weekly, a pro-Union, pro-Lincoln, pro-Republican magazine, from 1840 until the late 1880s. Abraham Lincoln called Nast "one of the great recruiters for the Union during the Civil War," the guest speaker said.

Nast, an avid anti-slavery advocate, drew huge cartoons — "impressive visual objects" — that appeared as double-page spreads in Harper's Weekly. "The image conveyed almost everything. It didn't need much text," Bernard observed.

Chronicling later political battles, Nast was the first cartoonist to use the elephant as a Republican symbol. "Nast viewed it as a noble animal with intense intelligence," Bernard said.

Nast incorporated the Tammany tiger in cartoons assailing Boss Tweed's power in New York. "This



Photo by Linda Comins

Warren Bernard, right, from the Library of Congress, shows vintage political cartoons to Sean Duffy, coordinator of adult programming and the People's University at the Ohio County Public Library.

empire of corruption was brought down largely by Nast," he said.

On a lighter note, Nast also created the 19th-century image of Santa Claus.

Bernard showed examples of two magazines — Puck (in print from 1877 to 1918) and Judge (1881-1948) — that used stone lithography in which cartoons were etched on stone and printed in full color. With the color cartoons, the magazines "eventually eclipsed Nast," he said.

In 1900, cartoons ran on the front page because most newspapers did not have photography, he said. Large papers began running photographs by World War I, he added.

Cartoons drawn during the Spanish-American War were the first to depict the United States as an international peacemaker. "We were the people who were going to go in and straighten things out," the speaker said of the images that stirred politicians and citizens.

Charles Bartholomew was the first cartoonist to have yearly books of his cartoons published, Bernard said. The compilations were issued from 1896 to 1906.

Herblock — whose work is featured in a display at the Wheeling library this month — was the longest-running cartoonist in U.S. history, Bernard said. Herblock coined the phrase, McCarthyism, and had a renowned distaste for Richard Nixon, he said. A

week after the Watergate break-in, Herblock drew a cartoon with footprints from the crime leading to the White House.

Citing another type of cartoon, Bernard showed a pair of panels, titled "Injun Summer" and drawn by John T. McCutcheon, appearing in the Chicago Tribune in 1907 and reprinted by the newspaper every year from 1912 to 1992. "There was a time when a single cartoon could transcend generations as this one did," he remarked.

However, he said, the Tribune stopped running the annual cartoon after 80 years out of concern that it might be offensive to Native Americans.

Another Midwestern cartoonist, ardent conservationist Jay "Ding" Darling, started the National Wildlife Federation and originated the duck stamp, Bernard said. He added that Darling had a huge influence on Herblock, who also was an ardent conservationist.

Political cartoons also appeared in leftist publications established between the two world wars. "There was a large, vibrant left wing in this country at this time," Bernard said.

During that period, cartoonist Boardman Robinson's work appeared in communist-socialist publications and in regular newspapers. Robinson's cartoon about the 1915 Pittsburgh steel strike is "one of the prized possessions in the Library of Congress," he said.