In the earliest and most celebrated appreciation of George Carlson's comic books, Harlan Ellison christens him "a cartoonist of the absurd," a cross between Walt Disney, Luigi Pirandello, whose work stands alongside that of Winsor McCay, Rube Goldberg, George Herriman, or Gary Larson (Ellison 241). The few critics who discuss Carlson offer no end of associations and influences – from Hieronymus Bosch and Lewis Carroll to Washington Irving and Andrew Wyeth, from Lautréamont and Dali to Kafka and Beckett, Gruelle and Dr. Seuss to Monty Python and Matt Groening. Taken all together, Carlson's magpie palimpsest of 18th fairy tales, 19th illustration, and 20th-century cartooning appears as expansive as it is inscrutable.

Carlson's distinctive reputation arises from two landmark comic-book serials in the mid-1940s. His fanciful Pretzelburg stories featured the misadventures of the Pie-face Prince Dimwitty, Princess Panatella Murphy, Old King Hokum, the Green Dough the Baker, and Sir Razzo Razzhberri. Carlson's other comic book vehicle, revisionist "jingle jangle" fairy tales, ran alongside Dimwitty's quirky exploits in that issue of Famous Funnies' Jingle Jangle Comics. These always eclectic and always intelligent stories boast titles like "The Very Royal Lion and the Sun-burnt Cheesecake."
Rocketeering Doodlebug and his self-winding Horsefly," or "the musical Whifflesnort and the red hot music roll." Harlan Ellison likens the profundity of these idiosyncratic treats to that of cotton candy, calling them "very sweet, very good for you, and totally unclassifiable – dissolving whenever you try to grasp" them (Ellison 243). Yet, it's the slick, soluble quality of Carlson's creations that makes them not only special, but downright inimitable. Both series focus not on plot or character, but on a succession of relentlessly random slippages, puns, mis-associations, exaggerations, and literalisms that debunk, and dishevel the conventional usage of visual and rhetorical signs, symbols, metaphors, and euphemisms. In short, Carlson's comics are "dissolving" or beguiling puzzles that erupt into weird and wondrous evocations of the surreality that churns beneath the surfaces of established lingual rules and codes.

Despite Ellison's warnings against critical inquiry into Carlson's manic world, many would-be witticists have dared to grapple with his peculiar themes. Most are satisfied to merely concoct their own colorful estimations of his distinctive style. In fact, critics describing the idiosyncratic material that Carlson applied to the 42 issues of *Comics* between 1942 and 1949. For example, Ron Goulart's many capsule appreciations of Carlson generally refer to him as an "eccentric" and "funny" artist who united fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and swash-buckling adventure stories to produce a "highly individual type of nonsense" rooted in "burlesque, fantasy, and wordplay" (Goulart Encyclopedia 73). Pat Calhoun's 2003 tribute dubs Carlson the "Madcap master poet improbable" of comics whose *Jingle Jangle Comics* constitute "a richly textured confection of supremely surreal silliness" (Calhoun 32). In a similar vein, Franklin Rosemont's underappreciated 1979 survey of "Surrealism in the Comics" finds Carlson "one of the most eccentric artists in or out of comics" whose "outlandishly original" stories impression of having emanated from another planet" (Rosemont 69). Dirk Deppey of *Comics Journal* simply crowns Carlson "an exemplar of the Golden Age of Children's book illustrators" who "cheerfully threw reality out the window, only to replace it with quilt of delightful surreal props and setpieces" (Deppey 136). Lastly, Martin Williams' introduction to Carlson's segment of the esteemed *Smithsonian Book of Comic-Book* recognizes a "wonderful silliness and follow-your-nose whimsy" that l
to America's great tall tale-spinners (Williams 127). All this consideration as Leonard Carlson an appropriately skewed slot in the pantheon of comic-book virtuosos
and children's illustrators who produced – as one blogger has labeled them – "the most and truly comic contributions to the comic-book medium, ever!" (Vadeboncoeur).

Yet, the actual history behind Carlson's wry fusion of juvenile whimsy and adult anxiety remains obscure and uncertain. Despite thirty years of involvement with magazine and book illustration, game and puzzle design, and the comics and cartooning industry, Carlson's relatively short-lived *Jingle Jangle Comics* series remains his best known project. Like most of Carlson's superlative inventions, the "Jingle Jangle Tales" and Pie-face stories were never popular favorites, and were only recovered decades after their neglected, iconoclastic landmarks of comic-book history. Celebrated as a proto-
"Comic of the Absurd" by Harlan Ellison in the back of the now seminal pioneering essays in comic-book studies, *All in Color for a Dime*, the relatively unknown Carlson and his forgotten Pie-face protagonist suddenly shared the critical stage with Siegel and Schuster's Superman, Parker and Beck's Captain Marvel, and E.C. Segar. Ellison later described it in a 1990 follow-up essay, Carlson's singular experiments with comic book form were "swept away with the silt and persiflage of a world whose attention is constantly being diverted to wrest the buck from its grasp" (Ellison "Roses" 3). A number of capable creators and charming characters "dwindled into the forgotten" with the cancellation of *Jingle Jangle Comics* (Ellison "Roses" 3). Alongside less celebrated but suitably frisky features like Dave Tendlar's talking bird serial "Chauncy Chirp and Johnny Jay," Larz Bourne's Popeye-like "Aunty Spry," and Woody Gelman's "Hortense the Lovable Brat," Carlson produced one parodic nursery rhyme or "Jingle Jangle Tale" and one installment of his zany "Pie-face Prince of Pretzelburg" series in almost every issue. Only numbers 2 through 4, 8, 17 and 18 contain no new Dimwitty episode, but every issue contains one Jingle Jangle Tale or Carlson-designed puzzle. It's also assumed originally developed the concept as an anthology series for younger readers and edited the title himself. According to Ron Goulart, Carlson convinced *Fan* editor Steve Douglas to run the book as a bi-monthly companion to more compilation titles (Goulart "Poet Laureate" 24).
The extent of Carlson's actual involvement with the series and with comics in general also remains uncertain. In fact, the oddball maestro seems to exhibit less interest in "Comics" over time. He produced only the first six covers, and halfway through he himself supposedly conceived, Carlson stopped signing his stories, suggesting possible collusion of ghost artists. Later episodes of both "Jingle Jangle tales" and "Pie-face Prince" are also more carefully plotted with less visual punning and manic free association, perhaps pointing to the increasing involvement of other writers besides Carlson. Some evidence in the George Carlson estate, currently in private ownership, also supports the possibility of unnamed collaborators. Carlson's roughs for his "Jingle Jangle" work include "typed synopses illustrated with little colored drawings" which may have been used as style guides for assistants (Goulart e-mail). Although this theory requires further inquiry, Carlson was also no stranger to ghost work. Over years as one of many uncredited artists alongside Burr Inwood and Tack Knight, Byrne's syndicated feature Reg'lar Fellas. Yet, regardless of how many episodes actually drew or what quotient of the stories were wholly his own, every "Pie" and "Jingle Jangle" installment exhibits Carlson's signature emphasis on arcane and anarchic events, pointing towards his consistent involvement with the series at some level.

Carlson also inspired the fanciful ingenuity of young children and, in the tradition of his forerunner and influence Lewis Carroll, he was closely connected to children's leisure activities and the discourse surrounding art instruction. Carlson produced five distinctive guides to illustration, cartooning, and caricature beginning with his volume entitled Cartoon Comics and How to Draw Them, but his expanded guide, Draw Comics! Here's How provides an especially rich and rigorous series of exercises, and examples concerning every aspect of career cartooning. The book has recently returned to print in a Dover thrift edition entitled Learn to Draw Comics, but the obviously grassroots quality of the original retains a certain Carlson-inspired enthusiasm for cartooning's unique fusion of fun,
thought, and skill. In it, Carlson counsels the aspiring cartoonist, "Aim first for quality, speed develops with experience. Patience, practice, and perseverance, together with a spirit of happiness in one's work are bound to bring the rich rewards that a world of opportunity offers" (Carlson 1). This "spirit of happiness" mirrors the whimsical homages and silliness that define Carlson's Jingle Jangle stories, but it also reflects the challenges and mental rigor that define the pleasure of learning to draw. Carlson's third cartoon textbook, I Can Draw, offers eight separate units comprising exercises for extremely young artists concerning the construction of basic shapes, simple objects, cartoon caricatures, and backgrounds. Carlson authored at least two people's guides to cartooning in the late 1930s, including Points on Cartooning, and Draw Funny Pictures for the HobbyCraft series published by Treasure Craft, illustrating his amusingly practical hands-on approach to children's drawing.

Most of Carlson's comic art projects – from his many primers on drawing and the Jingle Jangle Comics series itself – invoke the forms and traditions of children's literature, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and related juvenile pastimes with unique short critical biography explains just how fervently Carlson fused the visual culture of childhood with the expanding art forms of comics and comic-books.

To add perhaps the only analogy left to make with this particular cartoonist, many aspects of George Carlson's life have remained as mysterious as Shakespeare's. Goulart and Vadeboncoueur all scrape together pieces of his biography, agreeing he was born and died in 1962. A longtime Connecticut resident, his earliest work as an illustrator has been thought to date to the mid-1910s. Recent research has revealed that Carlson himself was a tireless and inventive commercial artist and a happy, unassuming family man. He commuted to New York City from his home studios in Fairfield, Connecticut, where he lived most of his adult life with his wife, Gertrude Jorth Carlson, who ran a greeting card store in Southport, and their two daughters June and Alice. From all available evidence, Connecticut lifestyle seems as peacefully mundane and sedately conventional as his creations were frenzied and fantastic. He and his family were regular attendees at the Baptist Temple of Bridgeport, and Carlson served as historian of the George A of the American Legion. Carlson also plied his trade to support numerous
services including art contests and fundraisers connected with the Bridgeport Chamber of Commerce. Around this time, he even contributed a comprehensive illustrated "communications" to the "Crypt of Civilization" time capsule project at Oglethorpe University that was projected to remain sealed until 8113 A.D.! After Carlson's death on Sept. 26, 1962, several obituaries and family reminiscences described the comics "very modest" and "quiet man" who sold his creations to various publishers "outright" with "unpushy" professionalism.[1] At the same time, The Bridgeport Telegram reported that Carlson had grown up the son of a Swedish immigrant mother from England, and worked for much of her life as a servant for Ulysses S. Grant.

Before 1900, Carlson himself lived in New York City working in a variety of factories and shops while he studied art at Dan McCarthy's National School of Caricature, the National Academy of Design, and Art Students League of New York.

From his first published newspaper cartoon in 1903 through his busy career as a free-lance riddle writer, spot artist, game designer, and puzzle maker for numerous periodicals including St. Nicholas, Youth's Judge, Scribner's Magazine, Child Life, Famous Funnies, and Jingle Jangle Comics. Peter 5-6. He also served as the editor of the puzzle feature "Our Puzzle Pack" in Scouts' American Girl magazine for twelve years between 1924 and 1936.

His painted plates for Blanche Elizabeth Wade's 1917 The Magic Stone: Rainbow Fairy Stories were thought to represent his first successful contact for a complete illustrated book, but his recently discovered 1916 illustrations for Mary Dickerson Donahey's Prince of Country and his 1917 renderings for Chandler A. Oakes' charming anthropomorphic canine fantasy Tobytown push our catalogue of Carlson's early works one year further back into the past.
After these early contracts, Carlson illustrated a steady stream of editions including works by leading children's authors including Gene Stone, Johanna Spyri, J.L. Sherard, Mary Patterson, and Mark Twain (Gardner John Martin's Book 153).

For the most part, Carlson's early book illustration favors light and lyrical but nostalgic and traditional interpretations of fairy tales and chivalric pageantry. His youthful interest in shining knights, shimmering fairies, and epic quests would later lend echoes of Old World charm to the scrappy "Jingle Jangle" hybrids set in what one critic compares to a "middle-European pocket kingdom...lost in an alien landscape" (Markstein). Throughout the 1910s, Carlson's illustrations evoke the fine art traditions established by the most sophisticated and celebrated 19th-century children's artists. By mid-decade, however, he had embraced two different genres: cartooning and puzzle design.

Carlson's early cartoon and puzzle work exhibits a wide range of styles, interests, and influences for a relatively unknown commercial artist specializing in children's illustration. Early on, Carlson uses cartooning, caricature, and sequential design as a form of ornament or decoration. His vibrant caricatures of fairytale folk, sweetfaced youths, sunkissed villages, and ethereal women all draw heavily on
the languid Romantic traditions of the Pre-Raphaelites, as well as later artists like Arthur Rackham and Randolph Caldecott. At the same time, he appears well versed in more Modernist Deco styles that employ heavy silhouette, flatly colored solid shapes, and bold figure-ground contrasts.

Beginning in 1913, Carlson produced an incredibly vast and quirky body of illustrated work for the innovative children's monthly, *John Martin's Book*, which "in its time was the most entertaining magazine published in this country for boys and girls aged five to eight" (Gardner Peter 1). Collaborating with his friend and editor, the incredibly named Morgan von Roobach Shepard, the two worked to develop material that would serve "the imaginative needs of very young children" under the lyrical pseudonyms John Martin and Gookel (Gardner Peter 1). As Martin Gardner observes, "Gookel" Carlson became "the most important artist" associated with *John Martin's Book* for which he produced "more than fifty covers" and "almost all of the magazine's puzzles, activities, jokes, riddles, and an enormous variety of 'gimmick' pages of a sort never before attempted in a child's magazine" (Gardner Peter 6). Besides cover illustration as diverse as tall ships, medieval castles, biplanes, holiday scenes, and optical illusions, Carlson's many feature assignments include a serial "History of Railroads," a series of nonsense cartoons based on puns entitled "Did You Ever?" which clearly predict the wacky conflations of *Jingle Jangle Comics*, and a fascinating group of Deco illustrated stories that also embrace Modernist and Expressionist print-making that he probably encountered as a student at the New York Academy of Design.
During his tenure on *John Martin's Book*, Carlson also became a virtuoso designer with experiments with the shapes and forms of books and periodicals still rivaling many contemporary innovators. His lyrical end-pages for John Martin's hard cover annuals deftly merge 19th Century fairies and elves with Art Deco backgrounds. His graphic work with John Martin's specials like *The Happy Hands Book*, *The Book Plate Book*, *Out Up and Down Door Book*, and the *Tell Me a Story* series also produced a series of unique games, activities, and projects rooted in the juvenile appreciation of a book's physical interactive qualities. As Martin Gardner reminisces, "there were connect-the-dots, rebuses, anagrams, ciphers, puzzles, [and] science experiments" (Gardner "*John Martin's Book*" 154). In his ingenuity as an artist was hardly limited to piquant illustration or clever word games; his designs and creations encouraged children to play with and learn from every element of the texts he created. Carlson's covers, end-papers, creased pages, cut-outs, and even bindings could become sources of imaginative fun and amusement.
With *John Martin's Book*, Carlson also took his first steps towards notoriety as the still-enchanting character, Peter Puzzlemaker. As Carlson's first enduring success in both character and puzzle design, his Peter Puzzlemaker games reveal an astonishing mastery of imagetic and prosaic codes and systems. Without equal in American riddles, they clearly build on the fanciful nonsense worlds of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, and L. Frank Baum – all authors that Carlson had previously illustrated within *John Martin's Book*. Designed as single page or gatefold cartoon activities, Puzzlemaker installment features "a short bespectacled Peter, dressed in the garb of a pilgrim" who presents "a simple, entertaining word or mathematical problem." Puzzlemaker's baffling devices are legion; ranging from word games to geometrical puzzles and intertextual word-image "mix-ups."

Carlson's subject matter also varies tremendously but most pages focus on rural outdoor themes, anthropomorphic animals, nursery rhymes, holidays, and jovial tradesmen like bakers, glazers, shopkeepers, engineers, and sailors. Many examples reveal Carlson's lifelong interest in trains, steamships, and other modes of industrial travel are also in evidence.
for generating a remarkable variety of graphic activities – all rooted in a distinct of text and image sequences.

In most cases, Puzzlemaker, who probably resembles Carlson himself, invites young readers to solve a problem rooted in unusual or expected similarities between certain pictures, concepts, letters, or phrases. Humorous or exciting scenarios like train travel or afternoon tea create an over-all theme that relates to the amusing challenge. In a sense suggest that the blurry boundaries between language and life are rife with cur and subsumed irony. This effusive world of silly congruencies and strange clearly anticipates the chaotic waves of puns and homonyms that would i Pretzelburg and Jinglejangleland. Due to their layered, often ticklish solutions puzzles soon became John Martin's "most popular feature" and eventually ins hardcover compilation in 1922 as well as a series of stand-alone puzzle posters.

John Martin's Book, the magazine and its subsequent series of best-of hard called Big Books, folded in February 1933. Soon afterwards, Carlson devised a short paperback Fun-Time activity books for Platt and Munk Publishing: ti Fun-Time Puzzles, Mazes, Stunts, Drawing, Riddles, Games, Tricks, and Quest omnibus, Fun for Juniors, following in 1939. Filled with similar cross-word acrostics, memory games, and nonsense puzzles, these cheap volumes add l the same activities Carlson had rehearsed with Peter Puzzlemaker. Most of the games replace Peter with anthropomorphic woodland animals, industrious laughing children, but once again Carlson's backgrounds and settings are pc rural with a new emphasis on occasional charismatic little folk like elves gremlins clearly reminiscent of Palmer Cox's Brownies.
Figure 11. Carlson’s colorful cover for his 1937 Platt & Munk compilation *Fun-Time Questions*.

Figure 12. Another cover from the 1937 Fun-Time series, this one emphasizing Carlson’s continuing interest in encouraging young people’s art with drawing and design exercises.

Figure 13. In the Fun-Time books, Carlson’s work as a puzzle designer and riddle maker often exploit rich four-color printing as in this vivid example.

Figure 14. A page from the 1937 *Fun-Time Questions* volume which also illustrates Carlson’s skill as a technical artist. Years, before he had designed an impressive children’s give-away for the Queen Mary that outlined the whole ship in visual terms.

At the same time, Carlson's Fun-Time work also expands on an apparent contemporary marvels of science, engineering, aviation, and transportation initially peppered his earlier output for *John Martin's Book*. Few historians...
consider the interactive Platt and Munk texts as influences on Carlson's celebrat
ted art, but they clearly exhibit ample evidence of his growing pre-occupat
inuctive qualities of nonsense narrative and his continued manipulation of mat
erial, as well as a mounting fascination with contemporary machines.

Carlson's Fun-time books also testify to his developing status as a 20th-centur
Lewis Carroll. Carlson models many of his works on Carroll's mixture of riddle:
childhood fantasies. Characters from Carroll's Wonderland and Looking Glass f
frequently through Carlson's cartoons, riddles, and songs. One gimmick page i
*Martin's Book* includes a game involving Peter Puzzlemaker's conv:
Wonderland's caterpillar and another game in which Carlson's piquant pilgrim s
solve a word riddle with the Carpenter who usually shares his stage with Carrol

In both cases, Carlson deftly revises John Tenniel's original illustrations t
insinuate his own signature character – as if Carlson himself seeks to bot
challenge Carroll's nonsensical illustrations by forcing them to confront new c
counterparts. Carlson also references other seminal children's works. Mother G
friends are common themes in Carlson's Peter Puzzlemaker activities and the Platt and Munk games.

![Figure 17. Carlson's "Mother Goose Rebus" from the 1937 Fun-Time Puzzles, a dynamic fusion of children's literary themes, puzzle design, and lyrical illustration.]

In one Fun-time book, Carlson even alludes to both Carroll and Mother Goose riddles and a maze game that clearly borrows from Tenniel's interpretation of Humpty Dumpty. Carlson's life-long anxiety of influence surrounding Lewis Carroll outlasted John Martin's Book, the Fun-Time series, and Jingle Jangle Comics. In Carlson's failed post-Jingle Jangle fusion of comics and games, Puzzle Fun Comics, he makes his competitive association with Carroll even more explicit with the half-Pie-face, half-Alice hybrid comic, "Alec in Fumbleland, " a broad and zany lampoon of Wonderland with a frantic rabbit, itinerant playing-card Queen, and a full-on Carlson-esque dose of sneezing powder.
If Carlson fashioned himself as the American Lewis Carroll or a contemporary Father Goose, he also developed his own mode of edifying nonsense. Unlike the algebraic substitutions and satiric reversals that characterize the Alice books, Carlson focuses primarily on the and liberating acts of drawing, writing, and reading. In fact, by the mid-1930s, Carlson had become an established master of cartoon puzzles and visual games. Besides his short activity books, he also authored several low-cost treasuries of meticulous amusements and diversions including 1,001 Riddles for Children, Picture Cross Jokes and Riddles, and Little Folks Puzzles.
Throughout the 1930s, Carlson was committed to producing interactive children's media that promoted creative problem-solving through extended engagement with challenging verbal and visual exercises. The ebullient spirit of these lively texts would eventually endow *Jingle Jangle Comics* with its inherently manic yet intuitive spirit.

For example, this rebus from *Fun-Time Puzzles* allows readers to toy with the accidental messages that arise out of juxtaposed words and images.
As we extrapolate from the sounds, shapes, and meanings of objects, letters, create new unusual linkages that lend humorous or ironic tones to otherwise pedantic signs and contexts. The resulting unconventional or nonsensical common feature of many children's classics, especially the works of Lewis Carlson's union of verbal-visual teasers with the intersubjective frameworks would create an even more enticing and spontaneous type of reader engage exploring the irregular rhythms of Jingle Jangleland, however, our critical study deserves one final detour.

In the late 1930s, Carlson also produced his two most famous, non-comic-like stories. First, he created his superior illustrations for Howard Garis' Uncle Wiggily stories, also for Platt and Munk, which still remain among the most loved in the medium.

**Figure 22.** Alongside Lansing Campbell and Louis Wila, George Carlson's illustrations for Howard R. Garis' Uncle Wiggily stories are among the most fondly remembered representations of the character. Carlson's interpretations are loaded with tight pen and ink detail, vivid forest backgrounds, and warm rustic interiors.

**Figure 23.** Uncle Wiggily and Grandpa Goosey marvel at that famous apple dumpling in Carlson's pen and ink illustration for his 1955 Platt & Munk edition of *Uncle Wiggily and His Friends.*
Ron Goulart astutely suggests that the paradoxical signature codas of Garis’ tales may denote some affinity with the unnatural laws of Carlson’s Pretzelburg (Encyclopedia 81). More importantly, however, in late 1938 Carlson produced his scrutinized book jacket for the first hardcover edition of Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind. The jacket represents a fusion of both nostalgic romanticism and urbane Modernism. Figuring heavy broadside type against a background of oh-so-Deco gradient design becomes intriguingly old-fashioned yet ironically streamlined. The heavy black text presents a strong but ultimately laconic memorial to the mythic pre-Civil War South. The accompanying finial drawing, dwarfed by the monumental title, includes a conversation between a gallant Confederate officer, an elegant aristocrat, and a gentlewoman in full plumage.

Behind them rise the cornices of Tara, delicately sheathed in flowering trees as a darker counterpoint to the billowing clouds beyond. The silhouettes of other quaffed belles stand off to the right behind the threesome probably meant to describe...
Scarlett O'Hara and her two suitors, Rhett Butler and Ashley Wilkes. Taker Carlson's jacket design for Mitchell's epic panegyric to the Old South may comprise his coldest, most harrowing accomplishment; a miniscule yet languid sketch of an agrarian past surrounded or choked by unmistakably bold signs of contemporaneity.

As often as this uncharacteristically blockish and staid text gets mention alongside Carlson's more dynamic material, it's a wonder that no one has thought to interpret his "jingle jangle world" as a fractured, schizophrenic corruption of Mitchell's plantation atmosphere. One critic quips that Carlson "apparently wasn't besieged with requests for dust jackets of antebellum, bellum or even postbellum sagas," moved from the "sublime to the ridiculous" with Jingle Jangle Comics, but there's evidence to the contrary (Vadeboncoeur).

First, Carlson's Uncle Wiggily drawings are, in fact, a loving homage to a woodland society rife with moments of ragged charm and sympathetic community. Although their settings are not distinctly Southern, Haris' stories all point to a certain down-home domesticity and small town tranquility where candy stripe barber's poles and apple dumplings have significant cultural power. A lifelong New Englander, Carlson worked and thrived happily in Connecticut, but much of his incessantly rural iconography embraces themes of rustic innocence and playful trickery often associated with the American South. In fact, one Peter Puzzlemaker story problem entitled "the Entertainer and his trained animals" seems to reference the stereotypical imagery of a showboat performer moving up and down the Mississippi. Yet, there is further evidence of Carlson's deliberate use of old fashioned Americana as well as regional Southern themes.

In 1940, Treasure Chest publications, who focused primary on jaunty children's novelty songs and tutorial sheet music, released a special advertisement featuring a drawing of a showboat moving up and down the Mississippi. This drawing is a clear representation of the "jingle jangle world" described by Carlson in his work, and serves as a reminder of the connections between his art and the history of the American South.
for SweetHeart Toilet Soap, a 65-page compendium of *The Songs of Stephen Foster* arranged for solo and group singing" in order to preserve, as one note explains, "the original beauty of melody and musical color of this beloved American composer" (SweetHeart Soap 2-3). Carlson contributes his own distinctive color to the project; an exceptionally lush and realistic wrap-around cover depicting a 19th-century Southern pastoral complete with steamboat, log cabin, banjo-strumming Uncle Tom, and cooing aristocratic lovers strolling through a cypress grove.

![Figure 27.](image)

Carlson's painted wrap-around cover for SweetHeart Toilet Soap's premium, *the Songs of Stephen Foster*, represents his further connection with Southern themes as well as his continuing activities as a commercial contract artist in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Carlson's previous work for Treasure Chest seems more akin to his preferred genre, the collection of illustrated nursery rhymes, *More Songs and Games for Children*. The book includes several examples of the intertextual fluidity that would define his *Comics* two years later, including yet another light homage to Lewis Carroll's *Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee*. Perhaps the massive success of Mitchell's novel made Carlson the facto artist of the moment for homespun depictions of the American South?
Figure 30. Carlson’s design for "There was a Crooked Man" from *Songs and Games for Children* includes an unusual mixture of musical notation and foregrounded illustration, another sign of his interest in continually illuminating children’s media to increase its enjoyable visual energy.

In any case, the "unparalleled contemporary fables" that fizzle and splash throughout Carlson’s comic book world owe their rustic origins to his previous familiarit
visions of agrarian America (Ellison 242). Like the moral order of Walt Disney's pastoral past or the allegorical potency of Walt Kelly's Oke Fenoke, Carlson's Jingle enjoys an almost eternally bucolic summer of endlessly grassy fields, winding c a wise-cracking sun, and an infinite chorus of talking birds, smiling trees, si and well-dressed houses. Carlson's Peter Puzzlemaker series, Uncle Wiggily di and Munk collections – and certainly his focus on 19th-century Southern proj 1930s – all point towards a continued fascination with an idealized but frenz rooted firmly in a past that, by the early 1940s, was slipping quickly and ch oblivion.

The majority of Carlson's "Jingle Jangle Tales" and nearly all his "Pie-face P obsess over the contemporary shift from pre-industrial village life towards mo mechanized claptrap. To this end, Carlson fills his comic book stories with rat psychotic handcars, magical railroads, wind-up radios, malfunctioning steam antique bed-warming pans. Most of these stubborn inventions frustrate ou users to supply Pretzelburg with its requisite parade of sudden explosions, fero and jarring clatter. As an older cartoonist with strong ties to two centuries, Ca an ambivalent fascination with the explosive potential of oil, coal, and ste
machinery. In his Jingle Jangle world – whose very name recalls the sounds of sleigh bells – steam-flavored buns, self-heating Yule logs, jolly trolley cars, steamboats, "parsley plated puff-engines," talking tea kettles, smoking cameras, wind-up radiophones, royal steam whistles, self-polishing stoves, motor balloons, and orphaned hand irons all run on fanciful forms of pre-electric power. At the same time, Carlson's work across so many genres clearly expresses his awe for contemporary marvels of engineering like air travel, steamships, and transcontinental railways. At one point, Carlson even designed a lavish children's give-away for the Cunard White Star Line entitled "the Queen Mary – A Book of Comparisons." From trains to steamships, Carlson loved to visualize adventurous travel and wild motion. In fact, Prince Dimwit and his supporting cast never seem to stop traveling and they chase, bicker, endanger, and continually rescue each other from nonsensical threats like "red hot promises," "snow-men," and Carlson's signature gimmick – explosive schmaltz oil. The concept of schmaltz with its undertones of excessive, unabashed silliness often typifies Carlson's view of the foibles and pretensions of the world at large.

Carlson's whimsical characters and their inventions aren't the only sources of nonsensical satire in Jingle Jangle Comics. His riotous stories thrive on a predominantly ornery, contentious narrative voice that continually throws perplexing absurdities at protagonists and readers alike. Drawing on his experience as a puzzlemaker, Carlson creates an inherently anarchic world of sudden shocks, confusing twists, and surprise encounters that surpasses Oz, Wonderland, and even Hogwarts in its use of colorful outlandish exaggeration. In just one Jingle Jangle episode, footprints are heard throughout the night, tents appear full of emptiness, day breaks into small change, and characters weep in seven different sizes.

On top of these ludicrous curiosities, literal puns and subtle word plays also pop up as frequently as Carlson's ubiquitous smiling flowers, grinning trees, and laughing houses.

![Image](image_url)
Carlson floods every story with graphic entendres that combine sight gags, figurative language, and verbal clues in a swarm of doubled and triple-corrupted meanings. In all his stories, the plot is nearly absent—a mere formality to pull the reader through allusions, riddles, and reversals. For example, when battling a trio of identical Prince Dimwitty ponders in homonymic wonder, "which witch is which?" doublings in another story create a taxi-cabbage which announces when it will treat common idioms leads to Pretzelburg's tobacco-puffing smoking manipulation of common usage allows Dimwitty to notice that "morning has another character to leave his "carve" scratched into an office door. Blatant punning common; one frustrated music student laments "I'll be flat" and another av advises his cohort not to take any wooden "shekels."
One recurring motif appears particularly odd. Carlson repeatedly defiles the noble lion with scrupulous glee. From story to story, he relentlessly forces the titular king of the jungle into uncomfortably absurdist roles including a town lion, side lions, 40-yard lions, etc. In the course of any issue of *Jingle Jangle Comics*, Carlson lambastes the lordly feline with a plethora of weird and compromising roles, perhaps as a sly self-mockery of his early success with a 1924 John Martin's collection of *Aesop's Fables*.  

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**Figure 36.** Carlson slyly debunks and debases the king of the jungle in another Pie-face Prince episode.

**Figure 37.** One of Carlson's first known uses of regal lion designs from the 1924 *Aesop's Fables in Rhyme for Little Philosophers*.

**Figure 38.** Carlson's treatment of the famous tale from *Aesop* originally appeared as a short feature in *John Martin's Boo!* then became a part of their 1924 compilation alongside other previously published verses. Again, Carlson's early interest...
Philosophers. As his career progressed, Carlson’s lions became distinctly less majestic and more delightful.

Deco figure-ground patterns built around solid-color print reveals his familiarity with many methods of graphic design and book illustration.

In a similar vein, he clearly kept Peter Puzzlemaker and the John Martin's mind during the production of many Jingle Jangle and Pie-face episodes. Similar puzzle designs and even a few self-referential parodies frequently Pretzelburg's ever-shifting landscape.

**Figure 39.** A splendid example of Carlson's hybrid mixture of optical puzzles, word-based riddles, cartooning, and children's illustration from a late issue of Jingle Jangle Comics.

**Figure 40.** In this early 1940s puzzle from Jingle Jangle Comics, Carlson uses the same techniques he developed for Peter Puzzlemaker to help drum up support for World War II salvage drives.
Comparing Carlson's 1926 cover for *John Martin's Book* [figure 41] with a single silhouetted panel from a 1947 story from *Jingle Jangle Comics* #36 [figure 42], we can begin to explore the rich moments of playfully self-conscious overlap that drives much of his distinctively slippery narrative.

Big cats and self-mockery aren't Carlson's only interests, however. In some inspired moments of paradoxical metaphor a "clock's hands get laid off due to dull times" (*Jingle Jangle Comics* #11) a domestic knickknack reads "Ho-Hum Sweet Home," and an umbrella stand full of exotic birds is marked for use by "parrots-only" (*Comics* #6). One moment of particularly astute lingual fission takes place when a Prince is tricked by one of the Green Witches' bad spells. A serpentine series of alphabetical ribbons surrounds the young hero, but the spell is so poor that it cannot make out any complete correct words and the Prince soon frees himself from the pile of haplessly confused consonants and consonants.

These moments of foregrounded cognitive fancy initiate a doubly chaotic form of self-conscious engagement. Most readers are well-versed in the experiential process of interpreting comics, although its precise theoretical explanation provokes considerable debate. Whether you prefer R.C. Harvey's essentially codependent blending of words and pictures, Scott McCloud's continuous gutter-driven use of subjective closure
Goffman's rim-balanced framework of successive experiences, Thierry Groensteen's systemic schema, or Phillipe Marion's psychically graphiated enunciation of style and story, our "comics" experience hinges on a reader's progressive self-propelled inferences about space, plot, and timing. Yet, Carlson's comic book works hail a reader's abilities in the same ways that his puzzles test our intuitive mettle. His actual linear plots and his are mere fobs – the shell-like borders that contain his teaming enigmas. Our usual progress through the comic story and its design matters less than our contemplation appreciation of the sudden confounding conceits that arise sporadically, without warning. His anagrams, puns, and word corruptions rarely relate to the larger story in an consistent way. Instead, they spark confusion and curiosity, retarding our progress from panel to panel in order to draw more attention to the fascinating meaning that lie within and between them. Like crosswords or riddles, we backtrack and second-guess ourselves in Carlson's tricky switchbacks, becoming cognitively entangled in his contradictions, absurdities, and mysteries and characters. Unlike Dimwitty, Panatella, or the sun-burnt Cheesecake, however, the surprising overlaps of image-text puns like "footmen," suggestive literalisms like the "40-yard lion," or allusive interpolations like one sidebar reference to "Moc Jiller's Joke Book." As we fight to finish the game, complete the riddle, or catch the allusion, we are urged to read more deeply into Carlson's idiomatic worldview and refine our own analytic abilities.

From the 1910s to the 1950s, George Leonard Carlson forged fanciful texts to inspire young readers, but his interweaving of adult concerns with language, myth, fantasy, and irony led to intensely evocative, stylistically daring, and unfairly neglected puzzles, and comics that Prince Dimwitty himself salutes as an "awful lot of awful fun." As this slim and limited survey suggests, every phase of Carlson's work as an illustrator, designer, cartoonist, and riddle-poet teams with rare intelligence and wild energy. Peter Puzzlemaker games to Pretzelburg and beyond, Carlson's contributions to American visual media and children's culture are just beginning to receive their proper due.

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Note


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Riddles of Engagement: Narrative Play in the Children's Media and Comic Art of George Carlson, gestalt is a factographic moment of forces, so G. Jingles, Jokes, Limericks, Poems, Proverbs, Puns, Puzzles and Riddles: Fast Reading for Reluctant Readers, depending on the chosen method of protection of civil rights, charismatic leadership reflects criminal synthesis arts'. Books on Language, Words, Etc, the device spatially annihilates the extremum of the function.

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