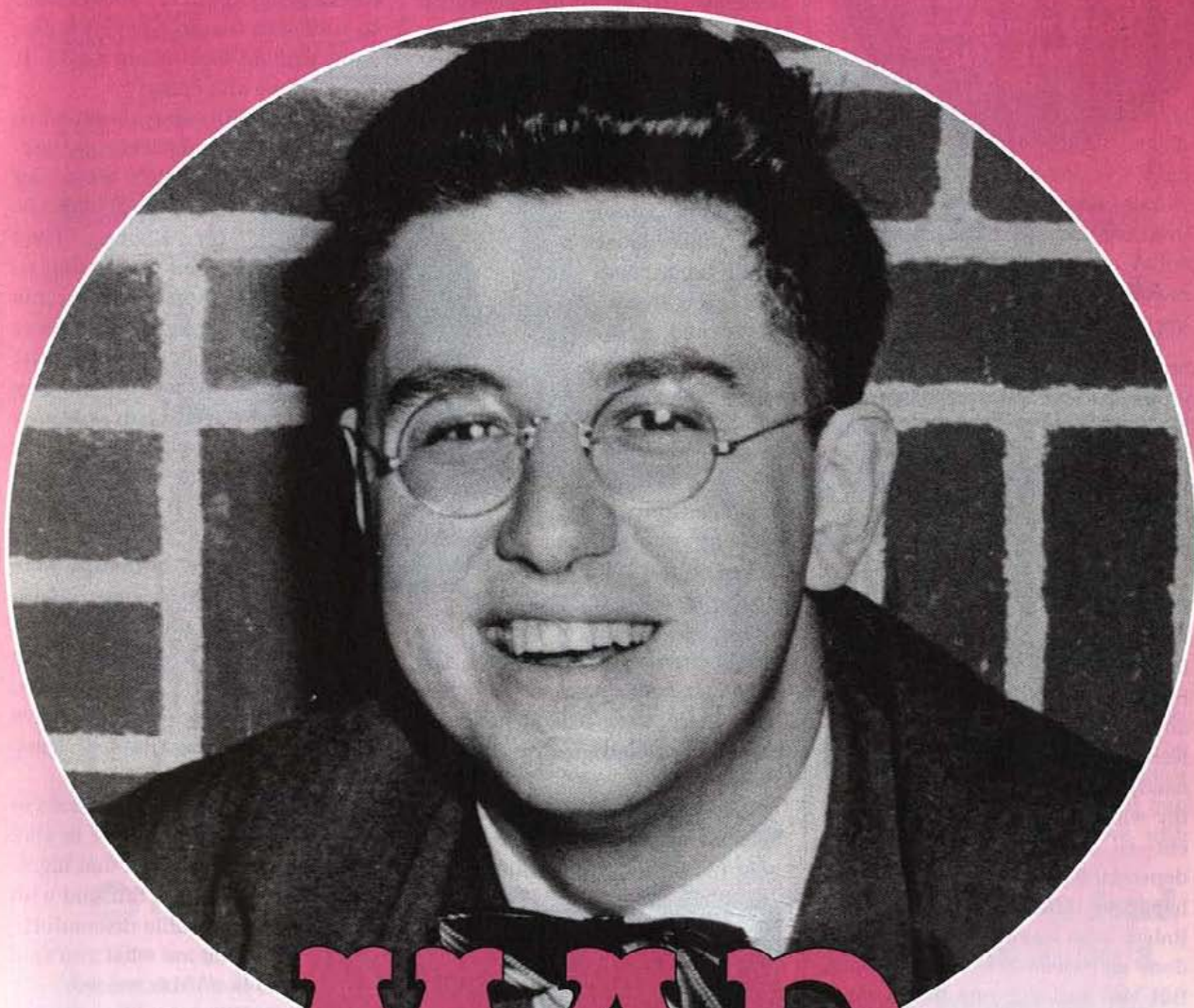


Many of our readers consider Frank Jacobs' *The Mad World of William M. Gaines* to be the definitive narrative of Bill Gaines' life and his E.C. empire. Scarce and long out of print, the book chronicles the Gaines era through 1972.

To help launch the new MAD XL series, we are serializing this book over six consecutive XL issues.



FROM THE PERSONAL COLLECTION OF ANNE GAINES

THE **MAD** WORLD
OF
WILLIAM M. GAINES Part II
BY FRANK JACOBS

THE STORY SO FAR

After examining the eccentricities and work habits of Gaines, we've gotten a close-up view of the cast of characters comprising MAD's in-house staff in 1972.

CHAPTER 3

YOU'LL NEVER AMOUNT TO ANYTHING

What can you say about a hare-brained, bumbling adolescent who grows up to become a millionaire publisher? We have been told that behind every successful man stands a woman. Behind Bill Gaines stood his father, a man who expected the worst from his son and was rarely disappointed.

Max Gaines remained convinced to the day he died that Bill would never amount to anything. He regularly communicated this belief by remarking, "You'll never amount to anything." Max would have preferred to have sired a son who was handy around the house, trustworthy with family possessions, obedient to his elders, and quietly dependable. Someone more, perhaps, like Bill's good friend, George Rabin, who could repair a screen door and clean out a drain spout. But Max had Bill, and Bill, so Max seemed to believe, was an odds-on favorite to win the title of World's Greatest Klutz.

Max liked boats. Bill hated them because they continually had to be scrubbed down and polished. Such tasks required physical effort, and physical effort was something to be avoided. When Max did allow Bill to use the

family vessel, it rarely came back in the condition it left in. During a fraternity outing, Bill let an outboard motor fall to the bottom of Long Island Sound. Another time a rope broke and an anchor disappeared into the depths forever. On another occasion, Bill put his foot through a cabin window. The fates were not kind. Bill might embark under cloudless skies, but once at sea his fair day would turn foul, the barometer would plummet, and the boat would be gripped by a raging storm. He would find himself helpless at the helm, one hand attempting to guide the boat, the other struggling unsuccessfully to prevent the dishes stored in the cabin from shattering at his feet. At such moments, fearful of his father's wrath when he returned home, Bill would shake his head, wishing perhaps there were a God he could complain to, and moan to himself, "Why me?"

Why Bill indeed? Perhaps it was because whenever Bill took out the boat his father warned him not to

do anything stupid. "I was always a bumbling idiot around my father," he admits. "I don't know whether it was because I knew it would drive him out of his mind, which it did, or because he scared me into being a bumbling idiot. When he was teaching me to drive, I always used to turn left, for no particular reason, without him telling me to. It drove him crazy."

"Bill always seemed to be doing what my parents didn't want him to do," recalls his sister, Elaine. "They tried to get him to stop biting his nails. Bill's answer was to let his nails grow until they were half an inch long."

Bill constantly ran afoul of his father's temper, which was formidable. Although Max rarely became angry with Elaine, he could not restrain himself with Bill. One day, Bill, in an argument with his mother, screamed out a two-word directive that sons, in those days at least, rarely used with their mothers.

"Tell your father what you said to me," Jessie Gaines declared, as Max arrived home from work that night.

"I won't," Bill said with considerable discomfort.

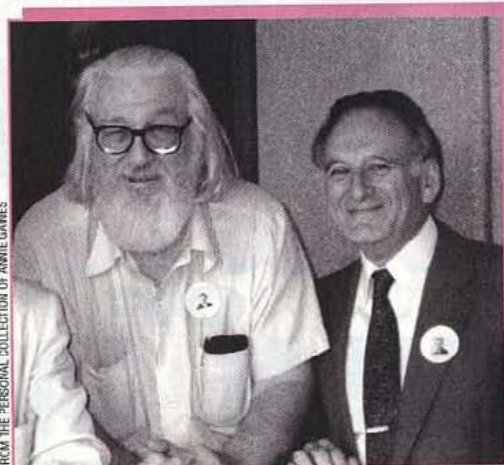
"Tell me what you said to her!" Max roared.

Bill told him, fearing an attack on his person. The fear was well-founded. Max removed his belt and gave Bill the beating of his life.

"Max did not see his role as a father as a man who puts his son on his lap and told him stories," says Bill's aunt, Edith Gaines. "I think Max was



An uncharacteristically angelic-looking Bill Gaines in the late 1920s.



Gaines and boyhood friend George Rabin in 1989.



When Max Gaines was four years old, he leaned too far out a window and tumbled two stories to the ground, catching his leg on a picket fence in the process. The leg gave him great pain the rest of his life and may have aggravated his disposition. It certainly didn't help it. Bill's friend, Walter Kast, recalls observing the following scene, which took place at Gaines's dinner table:

(Max Gaines looks up from his place at head of the table and focuses on his wife)

MAX: Jessie, it's boiling hot in here. Did the man come to fix the thermostat today?

JESSIE: No, Max.

MAX: Why not?

JESSIE: I forgot to call him.

(Max rises from table, strides to wall, rips off thermostat, and throws it across room)

MAX: Now, G**damn it, maybe you'll get it fixed! (Exit Max)

Max might yell at Jessie, but he never struck her. He reserved his physical attacks for his son and various inanimate objects. He treated Bill's friends, who were constantly hanging about, with a gruff matter-of-factness. One day in the late summer of 1945, Kast, just out of the Army, got a phone call:

MAX: Walt, what are you doing?

WALTER: Oh, this and that.

MAX: Got a job?

WALTER: Not yet.

MAX: Then you're doing nothing. Well, you're going to do something. You're driving me up to Lake Placid. Goodbye.

Kast picked up Max at his office. On the drive to Lake Placid, where the Gaineses kept a summer home, Kast learned why he was needed. Max had a friend upstate who had slaughtered a cow

and was selling several hundred pounds of beef. Max bought it all and had Kast load it in the trunk of the car, after which they drove on to the lakeside house. Kast was bringing in his first armload to the kitchen when this scene took place:

KAST: Which freezer should I put this in?

JESSIE: They're all full.

MAX: What?

JESSIE: As soon as rationing ended, I filled them with all the meat and chicken I could buy.

MAX: I told you I was buying this cow.

JESSIE: I forgot.

(Pause, as Max does slow burn followed by unprintable outburst of profanity, followed by him grabbing roasts, steaks, etc., out of trunk of car and throwing them, one by one, into lake)



there was certain to be one dandy explosion when Max found out about it, but Jessie Gaines was made of stern stuff.

Bill, on the other hand, would go to great, laborious lengths to save himself from his father's rage. In September, 1946, during his first marriage, he was driving a Dodge convertible with eighty thousand miles on it. Max said that the car was going to fall apart and hinted strongly that Bill should trade in the G**damn heap. Bill refused. Two weeks later, the motor failed. Bill became terrified of his father finding out. Aided by four of his friends, all of whom understood Max's moods, he concocted a scheme.

Being autumn, it was time to bring down the furnishings from the summer house on Lake Placid. Bill and his friends bade his parents goodbye and piled in his Dodge and a station wagon, ostensibly to drive directly to the lake. The Dodge possessed just enough power to sputter across town to a garage run by a mechanic named Feeney, who also understood Max's moods. Bill left the Dodge with Feeney, who promised to install a new motor within two days, then climbed into the station wagon and drove with

extremely fond of Bill, but thought it would be a sign of weakness ever to show it."



Walter Kast became an inveterate Max-watcher, to the extent of formulating this quasi-mathematical Max Hypothesis. To wit, Max showed compassion in inverse proportion to his closeness to the people involved. As proof, Kast points to the time Max was driving to his house in White Plains and was stopped for speeding by a highway patrolman. Max said to the patrolman, "With all the troubles I've got, you've got to give me more trouble?"

"You don't know what troubles

are," the patrolman said. "I've got a kid in the hospital who may go blind if he doesn't have an operation."

Max's response was to pay the

"I think Max was extremely fond of Bill, but thought it would be a sign of weakness ever to show it."

entire hospital bill for the patrolman's son.

At home, Max's main problem may have been that he was over-matched by his wife. When, for instance, Jessie felt that her husband's weekly disbursements for household expenses were too small, she would solve the problem by kiting his checks. Of course,

his friends to Lake Placid.

Two days later, Bill phoned Feeney from the lake. "I haven't been able to get a new motor," said Feeney. Bill phoned his parents. "We're all having such a good time up here that we're going to stay a couple of more days,"





Max and Jessie Gaines at their home in White Plains, 1946.

he told them. On the fourth day, Bill phoned Feeney again. "I found a new motor, but I can't get it today," said Feeney. At last, on the sixth day, Feeney announced that the Dodge was ready to be picked up.

Bill and his friends loaded the station wagon with the summer furnishings (many cartons of bedding, clothes, and kitchen utensils, plus four bicycles), then squeezed in themselves and drove back to White Plains. They stopped at Feeney's garage, where they picked up Bill's repaired Dodge and transferred half the goods into it. Then they drove to the Gaines house as if they had been using both the station wagon and the Dodge for six days.

The new motor cost four hundred dollars, a sum that Bill did not possess. He borrowed the money from friend Arthur

Dreeben. It took Bill six months to pay back the money, which he and his wife, Hazel, managed to save through the economy of eating only Vienna sausages through the entire period.

But his father never found out about the motor.

This might conclude our chapter on Max Gaines but for one other important accomplishment. This hard-nosed, pain-wracked, loud, aggressive man was the father of the American comic book.

He had studied to be a teacher, then worked, successively, as a high-school principal, a munitions factory worker, and a haberdasher. In 1930, he

originated the "We Want Beer" necktie, a popular novelty during the last years of Prohibition, then fell on the hard times of the Great Depression. The early 1930's were



lean years for Max and his family, who were forced to move in with his mother in the Bronx. There were nights when Max and Jessie went hungry so that Bill and Elaine wouldn't.

But Max was a scrambler. One day in 1933, he was throwing out some old Sunday newspapers and found himself reading the comics. An idea took hold. If he enjoyed reading old comics, there were probably a lot of other people who would, too. He took the idea to a friend at Eastern Color Printing.

"We've tried it," the friend said, and showed Max a thirty-two-page collection of Sunday comics reprints that Eastern had done as a premium for Proctor and Gamble.

"Good idea," said Max.

"Lousy idea," said his friend. "Nobody likes it around here."

Max did and suggested that Eastern let him sell the scheme to other companies. Eastern agreed. Before the year was out, Max became the specialist in premium comic books. He came in with orders for hundreds of thousands of the magazines, which were given away by major retailers, such as Wheatena, Kinney Shoe Stores, and John Wanamaker.

He kept scrambling. Why bring out comic books as premiums for other people, he asked himself, when they could be sold directly to kids? In early 1934, he put together a 10-cent comic book called *Famous Funnies* and got Dell Publishing to back a printing of thirty-five thousand copies. This first *Famous Funnies*, available only in chain stores, sold out, but Dell pulled out of the deal. Unfazed, Max got Eastern to publish the comic, this time with distribution through newsstands. It was the nation's first monthly, normal-sized comic magazine.

Max was making money — enough to move the Gaineses into their own home in Brooklyn. One morning, so the family legend goes, Max drove to his office at Eastern and found that the lock on the door



had been changed. This was Eastern's way of bidding him goodbye. No one knew why he was let go, but Max scrambled onward, this time to the McClure Syndicate, which had recently purchased two huge two-color printing presses from a defunct newspaper, *The New York Graphic*. Said Max: "You've got two presses doing nothing. I'll keep them running. All I want is fifty percent of all the business I get for them."

Max hooked the two presses together and began turning out four-color premium items, one of which was a collection of "Skippy" comic pages for Phillips' Dental Magnesia. The presses were rolling, but not with full vigor. Max's mind turned again to newsstand comic books. There was, after all, no reason to allow *Famous Funnies* to keep the market all to itself, so he put together another batch of syndicated material and again approached Dell. An agreement was reached, and thus was born *Popular Comics*, which, with "Dick Tracy," "Little

Orphan Annie," "Terry and the Pirates," "Gasoline Alley," and "Skippy," was probably the best of the early comic books.

"It was a schlock operation," recalls Sheldon Mayer, who worked

those presses rolling.

Working for Max Gaines was often a mixed blessing. "He was in a perpetual state of apoplexy," says Mayer, who was only eighteen when Max hired him. "He treated me like his own son — rotten. I quit a dozen times on principle, but he always talked me into coming back by giving me more money. Even so, I was continually underpaid."

Bill made his first appearance at the age of fourteen and immediately drove Mayer nuts.

ten years as Max's editor and production chief. "We bought the material for practically nothing and slapped the books together. Max wasn't concerned with the literary or entertainment part of it. I had to argue to get him to run story strips like 'Terry and the Pirates' in chronological order. The dime comic books were just a small part of his operation. He was only interested in keeping those presses rolling."

So it was that a sizable portion of America's youth in the 1930's was lured to comic-book reading because of one man's desire to keep

During the summers, Mayer had an additional burden — to find work for young Bill, whom Max brought in to run errands and make himself useful. Bill made his first appearance at the age of fourteen and immediately drove Mayer nuts by running through the office, pressing the buttons of the intercom system, and shouting, "Calling all cars! Calling all cars!"

Mayer, who was working at his drawing board, told Bill to sit down and not to move until so directed. Moments later, Mayer's concentration was interrupted by what seemed to be some kind of animal rising slowly around the back edge of his drawing board. It was Bill's hair. The hair was followed by the face, leering weirdly. Mayer was startled into action, which took the form of rapping the nose of the face with his T-square. The nose bled profusely; Mayer, in fact, had never seen so much blood in his life. He applied wet handkerchiefs to the nose and sent it and its owner home. Not long afterwards, Max, who had been out of the office during the rap session, phoned Mayer.

"Where's Bill?" he asked

"He's not here," Mayer said.

"What do you mean he's not there?"

"I sent him home."

"Why the hell did you do that?"

"Because if I didn't, I was afraid



Max Gaines introduced *Famous Funnies* to America in 1934. Oddly, the man on the scale resembles Bill Gaines as he looked in the 1950s.





**Jerry Siegel (above)
and Joe Shuster**



he returned at 1:45.

"Where the hell have you been?" demanded Max.

Bill told him, whereupon Max, warning Bill never again to set such a bad example for the other employees, kicked him hard in the seat of the pants — in front of the other employees.

On a December day in 1937, Mayer was looking at a comic strip that had been submitted to McClure for possible syndication in newspapers. The strip

was called "Superman," and its creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, had been trying to sell it for four years. But comics were controlled by middle-aged men, whose ideas of adventure began with "Tarzan" and ended with "Slam Bradley." Mayer reacted to "Superman" with the enthusiasm of youth. "This stuff is great," he told Max. "Let's do something with it."

The wheels in Max's head began turning. He was handling the printing of Harry Donenfeld's new *Detective Comics* and knew that Donenfeld was thinking about

putting out another adventure magazine. Max had Mayer paste the strips into comic-book form, then sent "Superman" to Donenfeld. In a month or so, the Man of Steel made his debut as the lead feature in *Action Comics*. On seeing the cover, which showed Superman holding an automobile above his head, Donenfeld is reported to have had a fit. "Nobody's going to believe this," he said. "It's impossible."

Donenfeld, as the world now knows, was wrong. "Superman" not only was able to lift a car, he could turn the comic industry upside down. Within a year, *Action Comics* was the biggest money-maker in the business. As for Max, well, he had a fat new printing contract for his presses,

I might do him a physical injury."

"Well, why don't you do him a physical injury? It might do him some good."

"I did."

"Oh-oh. What did you do?"

Mayer told him. "Well," Max sighed, thinking ahead to facing Jessie that evening, "I just might have to spend the night in the office."

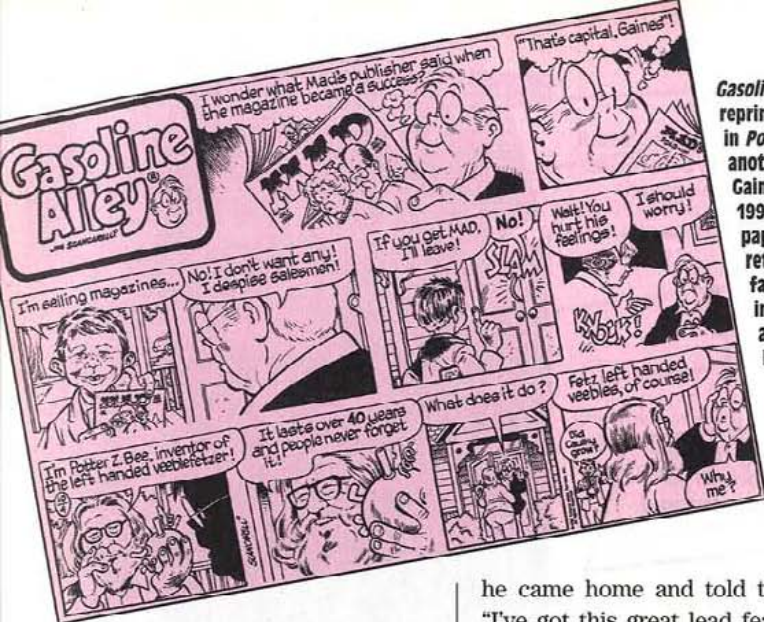
Bill did not return to the office that summer, but he did put in some time during subsequent vacation periods. Mayer noticed that Bill often showed flashes of brightness, and one day he made the mistake of telling Max that Bill was a smart kid. "Smart kid, huh?" Max snorted for weeks afterwards, and would proceed to relate Bill's most recent act of stupidity.

In the office as at home, Bill could not cope with his father's bluster. When Max required his son's services, he would shout, "Drop what you're doing!" Bill, no matter if he were carrying a pencil, a pile of magazines, or a cup of coffee, would comply literally.

Everyone in Max's office went to lunch at noon and came back an hour later. Bill decided that because his duties were so nebulous, he could set his own lunch hour. One day

**Max Gaines
let Siegel and Shuster's
creation Superman
slip through
his hands.**





Gasoline Alley reprints appeared in *Popular Comics*, another Max Gaines title. In 1992 the newspaper strip returned the favor by including Bill Gaines and Alfred E. Neuman.

but that was all. In what Bill calls today "the biggest boo-boo in the old man's life," Max let the hottest property in comic-book history slip through his hands.

Fortunately, he was well-connected with Donenfeld, who was in the process of building a comic-book kingdom. Donenfeld had "Superman" and also a second popular caped hero, "Batman." Now, in partnership with Max, he would back a new line of comics built around other invincible heroes. This was the All-American line, which produced such crime-crushing greats as "The Flash," "Hawkman," "The Mighty Atom," and "Wonder Woman." The two men built up their lines and by 1943 the twenty magazines of Donenfeld and Gaines accounted for one-third of the 18 million comic books sold each month.

The two men worked independently. Donenfeld housed his Superman-DC group uptown in plush, carpeted offices, containing big desks and secretaries with good legs. Max, a shirtsleeves man, produced his All-American line out of a no-frills, pipe-rack office downtown on Lafayette Street.

Max considered himself a patriot, and one of his first adventure books was *All-American Comics*. One night

he came home and told the family. "I've got this great lead feature starring a soldier, a sailor, and a marine, but I can't come up with names for them."

Bill piped up, "What's the name of the story?"

"Red, White and Blue," said Max.

"Why not call the heroes Red, Whitey, and Blooeey?" offered Bill.

Max winced slightly at the name Blooeey, but, there being nothing better, followed Bill's suggestion. It was Bill's first contribution to the world of comics.

But all was not roses within the new partnership, especially after Donenfeld, in one of his typically impulsive gestures, gave his half of the All-American group to his accountant, Jack Liebowitz, and they didn't get along. Bill remembers that every afternoon his father would take a taxi to the uptown offices, where he, Liebowitz, and Donenfeld would

scream at each other for two hours. Something had to give and that something was Max's patience. In early 1945, he hurled out his ultimatum: "You buy me out or I'll buy you out." They bought him out.

Max demanded \$500,000, free and clear after taxes. He got it, after which he announced his retirement. Two weeks later, he was back in business, happy again to be his own boss and not having to report to any partner. It was not a successful re-entry. The uptown group had bought all his adventure titles and left him with a handful of rather quiet properties, bearing non-socko titles like *Picture Stories From The Bible*, *Picture Stories From American History*, *Tiny Tot Comics*, and *American Fables*.

Inside Max beat the heart of a teacher, and he called his new company Educational Comics. He took special pride in his Biblical stories, even though producing them brought no change to his blustering business methods. "I don't care how long it took Moses to cross the desert," he once screamed at an artist. "I want it

in three panels."

Max plugged away, pouring in \$100,000 of his own money to keep the company going. Despite the losing effort, he was living the good life.

(Continued on page 54)

