

## THE MAD WORLD OF WILLIAM M. GAINES PART II

(Continued from page 60)

nate, Elder has said, that the man was not a psychiatrist.

Elder attended high school with Bess Myerson, who knew him as Wolf, his real first name, which he used until he entered the Army. In 1945, shortly after being discharged, Elder and two Army buddies were passing by Loew's State Theatre on Broadway. Making a personal appearance was Miss Myerson, who had recently been named Miss America. Elder bet his chums a sizable amount of money that on seeing him, Miss Myerson would throw her arms around him. His buddies took the bet, whereupon Elder sent word, via the stage door attendant, that Wolf Elder would like to see Miss America. Moments later, Miss Myerson appeared, screamed "Wolfie!" and hugged her school-mate. Elder's buddies, open-



Bill Gaines, Al Feldstein and their favorite comics.

mouthed, paid up.

And, of course, there was Gaines, who was everyone's favorite audience because he laughed out loud and long at any nonsense that was perpetrated. One morning, Feldstein and Johnny Craig decided to give Gaines a blazing welcome. The idea was to spread flammable rubber cement thinner on the floor of Feldstein's office, summon Gaines, then ignite the liquid as he entered. It went according to plan, except that when Gaines walked into the inferno he slipped on the stuff and fell to the floor. Feldstein, terrified, jumped on Gaines and beat out the flames. Gaines, ever so slightly singed, was hysterical with laughter.

He was not the normal breed of boss. Among other unorthodoxies, he dressed sloppily and went for

days without shaving. One day the building's elevator operator, whose name was Cesar, took out his billfold and said, "Here's a dollar. Get yourself a shave." Gaines snatched the dollar and kept it, which bothered Cesar, who had not expected Gaines to take the offer seriously. From then on, Gaines scrupulously avoided Cesar, sometimes even walking — yes, walking — up and down the seven flights to avoid a confrontation. Cesar became frantic. He wanted his dollar back. Gaines let the intrigue go on for a month, then one morning strolled casually into Cesar's elevator and returned the dollar.

For all his sloppiness and practical jokes, Gaines projected an employer's image. Walter Kast's kid brother Paul, whom Gaines employed briefly as a stockroom boy, was amazed to come into the office and behold this "teacher-type of a man" running things. "He appeared easygoing, but there was no doubt that he was the leader," Kast recalls. "It's incredible how he



ILLUSTRATION BY SERGIO ARAGONES



slid into his new role."

Tranquility reigned. Gaines's sales figures showed that he had up to half a million readers per issue, and he was happy. Feldstein, who was blasting out seven magazines and getting a good fee for each, also was happy. The artists

lampooned what he knew best — the comics themselves. He became excited about the idea and told Gaines, who liked it but didn't expect to make any money from it. The first issue of the new magazine came out in the summer of 1952. During the planning

"Smilin' Melvin" — Kurtzman had a thing about the name Melvin — and an onslaught on Walt Disney's most revered creation, titled "Mickey Rodent."

Kurtzman hung in with his war comics, but was overwhelmed by his one great enemy — time. He simply couldn't meet the deadlines. Besides, the Korean War had ended and sales of the books were slipping. Taps sounded for *Frontline Combat* in 1953 and for *Two-Fisted Tales* a year later.

MAD, however, was taking off like a skyrocket, building up a loyal, sometimes fanatical, following. Among its converts was Lyle Stuart, a controversial young publisher, whose tabloid, *Expose*, assailed sacrosanct areas of the American establishment. Stuart wrote a letter praising MAD and requesting a subscription. Gaines wrote back that he was a charter subscriber and zealous admirer of Stuart's *Expose* and enclosed a foot-high parcel containing all of EC's magazines. A week later, Gaines bought shares of *Expose* stock, which kept Stuart from going out of business.

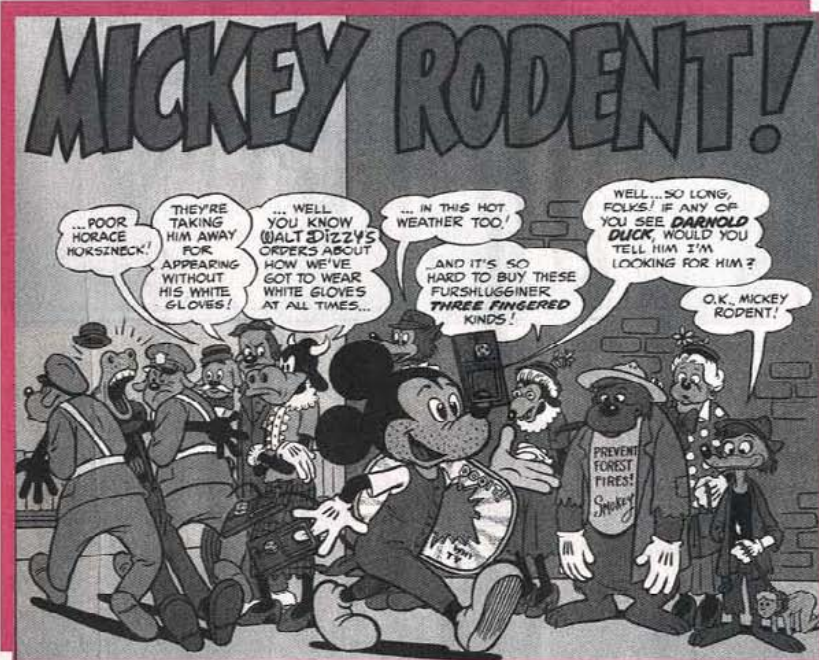
A friendship developed. Gaines was impressed by Stuart's independence. He couldn't understand how a man on the brink of poverty could appear so confident. Stuart, then as now, thought that Gaines was one of the last of the world's "originals."

Stuart became EC's business manager after Frank Lee retired in 1953. Gaines would soon find that Stuart was a helpful man to have around. The days of the horror comics were numbered. A witch-hunt was afoot in the land, and Gaines's name was on the list.

## CHAPTER 6

### BILL! BILL!

Throughout the horror period, Gaines lived with his mother. Jessie



were working regularly and were paid on delivery of a job, and they were happy, too. Well, then, was everybody happy? No, Kurtzman was not happy. He was producing two successful war comics and felt that his income should be closer to Feldstein's. Gaines pointed out that Feldstein was turning out seven books to Kurtzman's two, then put forth a proposition.

"I'll tell you what, Harvey. I know you're a humorist. Why don't you put out a humor magazine. Just slip it in between your two war books and your income will go up fifty percent."

Kurtzman thought it over and decided that the kind of humor magazine for him to do would be one that

stages, it was referred to as EC's Mad Mag. This title was eventually shortened to MAD.

There had never been anything quite like it, this furshlugginer MAD. Scripted by Kurtzman and illustrated by EC veterans Will Elder, Wally Wood, Jack Davis, and John Severin, the new magazine began by parodying those comics that Kurtzman liked least — Gaines's horror and suspense stories. Later, MAD assaulted other venerated institutions of comicdom. "Archie," the fun-loving teenager, emerged as "Starchie," a zipgun-carrying juvenile delinquent. "Superduperman" (guess who) spent eight pages battling his rival super-hero, Captain Marbles (guess who again). Other efforts included "Little Orphan Melvin." "Melvin of the Apes," and



was happy having her son around because fighting with him brought back memories of her marriage to Max.

"We were very fond of each other, but we couldn't stand each other," says Gaines.

"There was a healthy mutual respect," recalls Sy Koonos.

"They maintained a high level of bickering banter," offers Paul Kast.

Jessie Gaines was a very proper lady and she was appalled by many aspects of her son's behavior. But Gaines, fortified perhaps by the flush of success, was not easily domineered, as can be evidenced in these tender mother-son exchanges:

JESSIE: Why are you driving so fast?

BILL: Because I want to splatter my body all over the road.

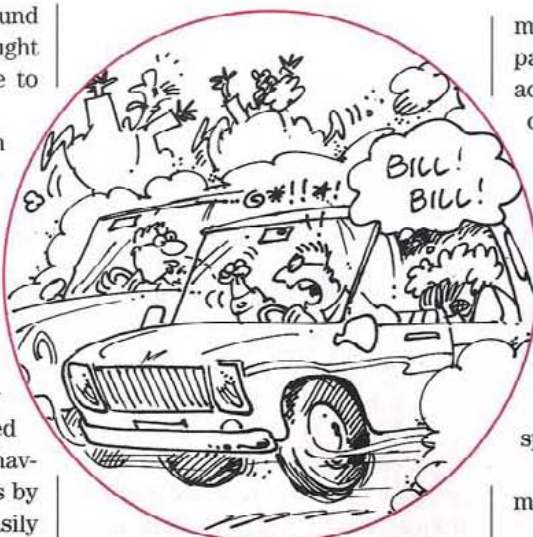
JESSIE: Why do you smoke so much?

BILL: Because I want to get lung cancer.

JESSIE: Why don't you lose weight?

BILL: Because some day they may give an award for Biggest Slob and I want to win it.

One night Gaines dined with the Feldsteins. The meal was marred by a family quarrel, whereupon Gaines, with infinite wisdom, lectured the



Feldsteins that it was bad manners to argue in front of a guest. A few weeks later, the Feldsteins dined with Bill and Jessie, who launched into a shouting match that made the Feldsteins' tiff seem like a tea party. The Feldsteins were outraged. How dare Bill lecture them when he behaved just as badly! Bill replied that quarreling with one's mother was an entirely different matter than quarreling with one's wife, a piece of logic that he did not believe for one minute.

Jessie and Bill lived for a time in Brooklyn, then, after the horror comics caught on, moved into a plush high-rise in Manhattan. She was proud, perhaps a bit stunned, to see her son a success in business,

but her proper Pennsylvania soul recoiled at his behavior in public.

Bill was and is a gutty driver. One afternoon, accompanied by Jessie and Walter Kast, he sped down Manhattan's West Side highway at seventy

miles an hour. Another motorist passed Bill and cut him off. Bill accelerated to eighty and cut him off. The other motorist cut off Bill again, this time spitting on Bill's car while passing. Both cars zoomed through the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel. At the toll-booth, Bill saw the other motorist talking to a cop and pointing toward Bill's car. Bill leaped out, raced up to the cop, and screamed, "The son of a bitch spit on my car!"

From the back seat came Jessie's mortified shriek — "BILL! BILL!"

Around the same period, Bill, again accompanied by Kast and Jessie, was involved in a minor collision in Queens. While Bill discussed the accident with the other driver, a woman bystander came over to Kast and yelled, "I saw the whole thing!" Why don't you Communists go back where you came from! Bill dashed back to his car and loudly called the woman every four-letter word he could think of.

From the back seat came Jessie's anguished scream of distress — "BILL! BILL!"

It may be argued with some degree of success that Bill was not the easiest kind of son to understand.

"He was a very different kind of boy," says his sister Elaine. "Sometimes I think he worked at being different."

He showed his talents early. At the age of seven, he dismayed the faculty at Berkeley Institute, a private school, by blowing itching and sneezing powder on his classmates. At Berkeley, students were required to print their lessons.

Bill wrote his in script. In the fifth grade, he transferred to a public school where stu-



Bill knew how to get to his mother. One weekend they stopped for lunch at a roadside restaurant. On leaving, Jessie took a roll for her canary, which was in a cage in the car. She felt it necessary to explain this to the waitress.

"I'm taking this for our canary in the car."

Bill entered the conversation.

"What canary?" he asked.

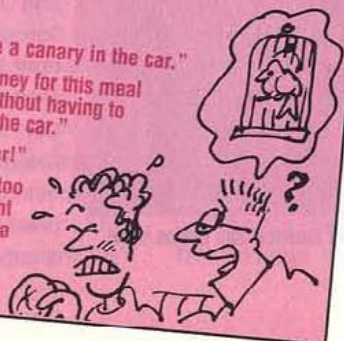
"Bill, you know very well we have a canary in the car."

"Mother, we've paid very good money for this meal and you're entitled to take a roll without having to make up stories about a canary in the car."

"But we do have a canary in the car!"

"Mother, this waitress will be only too glad to let you have a roll if you want one, but you don't have to make up a story about a canary in the car."

"BILL! BILL!"



dents were required to write in script. Not Bill, who penned his lessons in print.

He liked using his mind almost anywhere but in the classroom. He spent one summer studying hieroglyphics at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He

became a proficient photographer and set up his own darkroom. He learned how to read Braille, and he mastered enough sleight-of-hand to become a practiced amateur magician. He went his own way. Other lads might say their prayers, Bill gave God some thought, decided it was illogical for Him to exist, and at the age of twelve became an atheist. Gaines's refusal to be a believer has persisted to this day. Whenever he wants to convey sincerity, he prefaces it by saying, "I swear on my honor as an atheist..."

Bill and his teenage friends were an odd lot — loners all yet liking each other's company. One Saturday, Bill and Walter Kast decided to see the show at Radio City Music Hall. They asked George Rabin if he wanted to come along. George, as was occasionally his way, wouldn't answer. Bill and Walter set off for the subway. George followed a block behind them. Bill and Walter boarded the subway. So did George, but in another car. Bill and Walter entered the theatre and took their seats. George sat in the row behind them. Throughout the movie, George kept hitting Bill and Walter on the back of the head. Bill and Walter would make no response. The movie ended, the lights came on for the stage show, and Bill

wheeled around and hit George in the face. Only it wasn't George. He had

moved a few seats over and Bill had struck a woman. Havoc ensued, with Bill almost being thrown out of the theatre.

same William Gaines, as if there could be two of them.

Somehow, Bill scored 100 in the New York State Regents Examination in chemistry, which made him believe that he was destined to be a chemist. He enrolled in

## Bill and his teenage friends were an odd lot — loners all yet liking each other's company.

the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, a college historically noted for its high attrition rate. Bill contributed to the tradition by flunking out in his third year. It did not help that chum Arthur Dreeben was a classmate. They engaged in chalk fights in the classrooms. They fought duels with slide rules in the hallways. They embarked on strange rituals, such as eating the exact same lunch for months on end. As freshmen, they became the first students in many years to be put on probation for refusing to attend gym class. By the time they were juniors, they were being disciplined for any disturbance in school, no matter if they were nowhere near the scene.

After he flunked out of Brooklyn Poly, Bill left the house each morning as if he were going to class. This was to prevent Max from learning of his son's disgrace. Jessie prayed that Max would not find out. Her prayers were answered when Bill announced that he had successfully prevailed on his draft board to accept him for military service and that he would have to "drop out of school." This was now 1942, and the country was at war. Bill had tried to enlist in the Army, Navy, and Coast Guard, but was turned down because of his asthma and poor vision. He was finally accepted for limited service by



FROM THE PERSONAL COLLECTION OF ANNE GAINES

Bill does his part to protect America (and put on some weight) during WWII.



the Army on the condition that he do no fighting.

Bill was glad to get away from home, even though it meant giving up his nighttime job as air raid warden. Not that he spent much time scanning the skies for Nazi bombers. As a warden, he was given a large water-filled fire extinguisher, and he and George Rabin spent many thrilling evenings driving the streets of Brooklyn, drenching people riding in streetcars and dousing couples necking in parked cars.

"George had uncanny aim," Bill recalls. "He could arch a shot perfectly from a moving car and hit a pedestrian smack in the face at thirty feet."

Bill was assigned to the Army Air Corps. He underwent only eighteen days of basic training, which was fortunate, since he was unable to lift a rifle to shoot it. He had read somewhere that certain people suffered from pains called adhesions. Whenever he was ordered to march or run, he would grip his side and complain of his adhesions. The stratagem worked.

Bill wound up as a base photographer (he had been turned down on his first choice, to go to cook and bakers school), and he had, what servicemen call, "a good deal." He worked out of a photo lab, didn't have to stand inspections, and could go four or five days without shaving.

This was at De Ridder Army Air Corps Base, Louisiana, where Bill was assigned to take pictures of training planes that crashed. His photographs were excellent, but his ability to understand orders left

something to be desired. One morning he was being flown to the sight of a crash. The pilot told him, "Don't pick up your parachute by the handle." Bill nodded and picked up the parachute by the handle, which caused it

**Bill with his first wife and second cousin, Hazel (hum *Deliverance* theme here).**

to open inside the plane. The pilot shrugged, "If the plane should develop trouble and we have to bail out, you can forget about joining us."

In early 1945, around the time of the Battle of the Bulge, the Army was rounding up thousands of men in stateside bases and shipping them

have asthma, but it was hiding. He resigned himself to being shipped to the battlefield. At the eleventh hour, he took a final physical. This time his asthma showed itself in all its majesty, and Bill was allowed to stay in the States. He figured out what had happened. During the first

physical, his fear at going overseas got his adrenaline going, which cleared his lungs. By the time of the final physical, he was resigned to his fate and his adrenaline flow had subsided, creating, he recalls, "the most beautiful display of wheezing and gasping you've ever heard."



to the front in Europe as infantrymen. Everyone was being taken, even unshaven Air Corps photographers on limited service.

Bill counted on his asthma to exempt him. He was given a physical, but his chest was clear as a bell. Bill couldn't understand it. He did

Bill was girl-shy. His sister Elaine can't remember him having a date in high school. He thought he might improve his social life when he joined a fraternity at Brooklyn Poly, but his Phi Alpha brothers were of little help. Neither were his old chums. One night, he and Rabin were driving through Brooklyn, dousing pedestrians with Bill's fire extinguisher. Two girls approached the car. They smiled invitingly. Rabin drenched them.

The first girl Bill dated with any momentum was his second cousin, Hazel Grieb, who lived in Pennsylvania.



Much of the momentum was supplied by Jessie, who wanted a wedding. Any reservations the couple had about marriage were neutralized by Jessie's matchmaking. Bill and Hazel were married in 1944 and lived off-post during Bill's last year in service.

Bill wound up his three years, four months, and twenty days in the Air Corps as a private first class. He and Hazel returned to New York, where Hazel got a job working for Max. Bill enrolled again at Brooklyn Poly — returning war veterans were being treated with compassion — but it was hopeless, so he transferred to New York University to become a teacher.

After his divorce from Hazel and his father's death, Bill lived with his mother for eight years. It was during this period that he cultivated his compulsion for neatness. Max Gaines had often preached the maxim, "A place for everything and everything in its place." Bill Gaines applied the rule to his own life with the efficiency of a poorly dressed Prussian. Then as today he would come home from the EC offices and embark on a thirty-minute inspection. He would check each telephone to make sure it was in its prescribed location. He would make a tour of each closet, counting every towel and sheet. He would open the medicine chest and check off each bottle, noting the number of pills or level of liquid therein.

He would scrutinize his personal

effects. Were his socks identically rolled and stacked symmetrically in the drawer? Were his cigarette lighters — one for each day of the week — lined up on his dresser in proper order? Had the maid placed the most recently laundered handker-

completed an appointed task. Every so often, when Gaines was out of the office, Paul Kast would embellish the list with a spurious entry, such as "Button fly." At the end of the day, Gaines would run his fingers down the list, then explode, "What son of a bitch wrote 'Button fly' on my list?"

He would stay in the office until everyone else

had left, then go from desk to desk, dumping ashtrays and tidying up. He continued this practice until 1954, when art director John Putnam brought a slovenliness to EC that not even Gaines could control. "When Putnam came to work for me, I knew I'd met my match," he says.

Gaines bought a blue Chrysler. He kept a pocket ledger, noting every penny spent on gas, tolls, repair, and upkeep. When he traded in the car three years later, he was able to calculate exactly what it had cost him per mile to drive during his

## Well into the horror days, Gaines still viewed the opposite sex with the confidence of a stuttering teenager.

chiefs beneath the ones already in the drawer, so that they could be used in rotation?

He had certain months for buying certain wearables — shoes in October, shirts in May. His ties — he wore them more often in those days — had to add up to units of three, six, or twelve. "Christmas would kill him," recalls Walter Kast's wife, Ruby, who worked at EC during the horror days.

In the office, he made exact measurements so that his blotter was equidistant from all four edges of his desk. He began to keep precise lists of things to do each day, checking off each item as he

**THE**  
**EC**  
**"PUBLISHER**  
**OF THE**  
**ISSUE"**  
**WILLIAM M.**  
**GAINES**  
**ALIAS MELVIN**



In Kurtzman's MAD, everyone from Alfred E. Neuman on down was eventually referred to as Melvin.



period of ownership.

His passion for unspoiled orderliness spilled over into his social life. One night a date began to throw up in his car. He pulled over and pushed the unlucky girl out the door, causing her to land face down in a snowdrift. The measure was necessary to preserve the pristine condition of the car's interior.

Well into the horror days, Gaines still viewed the opposite sex with the confidence of a stuttering teenager. One day he and Sy Koones had the opportunity to pick up two girls at the beach.

"What do I say? What do I do?" Gaines asked.

"Just smile," Koones said.

Gaines spent the afternoon walking around with his face stretched in an inane grin.

His bachelorhood lasted until 1955, when he married his second wife, Nancy. They had met three years earlier when Nancy came to work in EC's subscription department. Friends wondered if they would ever set a date. That they finally did was due to the intervention of an almost total stranger.

In the fall of 1954, Gaines and

exchanged the usual insurance data with the driver of the other car, whose name was Gene Zahn. About a year later, two blocks from the gas station, Gaines pulled up to a newspaper stand. After buying his paper, he returned to his car, backed out a few feet and was struck by a car

rounding the corner. No one was hurt, and Gaines exchanged the usual insurance data with the driver of the other car, whose name was Gene Zahn.

"Didn't we have an accident a year ago?" Gaines asked.

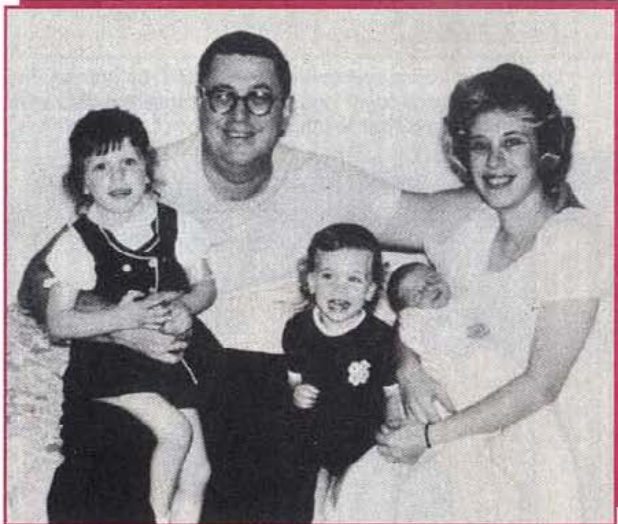
"I believe we did," answered Zahn, giving a polite nod to Nancy, whom he remembered from the previous run-in. "Say, don't you think it's time you two got married?"

Gaines thought it over and decided that the point was well-taken. Within a month, he and Nancy were married.

The problem was where.

Gaines, among his other phobias, has always had a great fear of having blood taken out of him. If the couple were married in New York, he would have to undergo a Wasserman blood test.

The prospect was intolerable. He therefore talked Nancy into getting married in Maryland, where a Wasserman wasn't required. After driving there, however, they discovered that Maryland employed no justices of the peace; there were only religious cere-



Bill with second wife Nancy and their children (l-r), Cathy, Wendy and Chris.

monies. Gaines, an atheist, couldn't stand the thought of that, either. He and Nancy drove back to New York, where Gaines tried to talk his doctor into putting him to sleep so he wouldn't have to watch the blood being taken out of him. The doctor refused. Gaines gritted his teeth, shut his eyes, had his Wasserman, and was married.

Jessie Gaines wept after the wedding, her tears a mixture of joy and despair. She was gaining a daughter, but she was losing an adversary.



Nancy were turning into a gas station on West 96th Street in Manhattan. As they made their turn, a car came down the street and barreled into them. No one was hurt, and Gaines

## COMING UP NEXT!

The axe falls on EC's horror line. Harvey Kurtzman rides a wave of success with the early comic book MAD, then turns it into a slick. Gaines and Kurtzman suffer a bitter falling out. Al Feldstein takes over as editor. MAD (Cheap!) enters its glory years, and we meet the artists and writers present at the creation.

