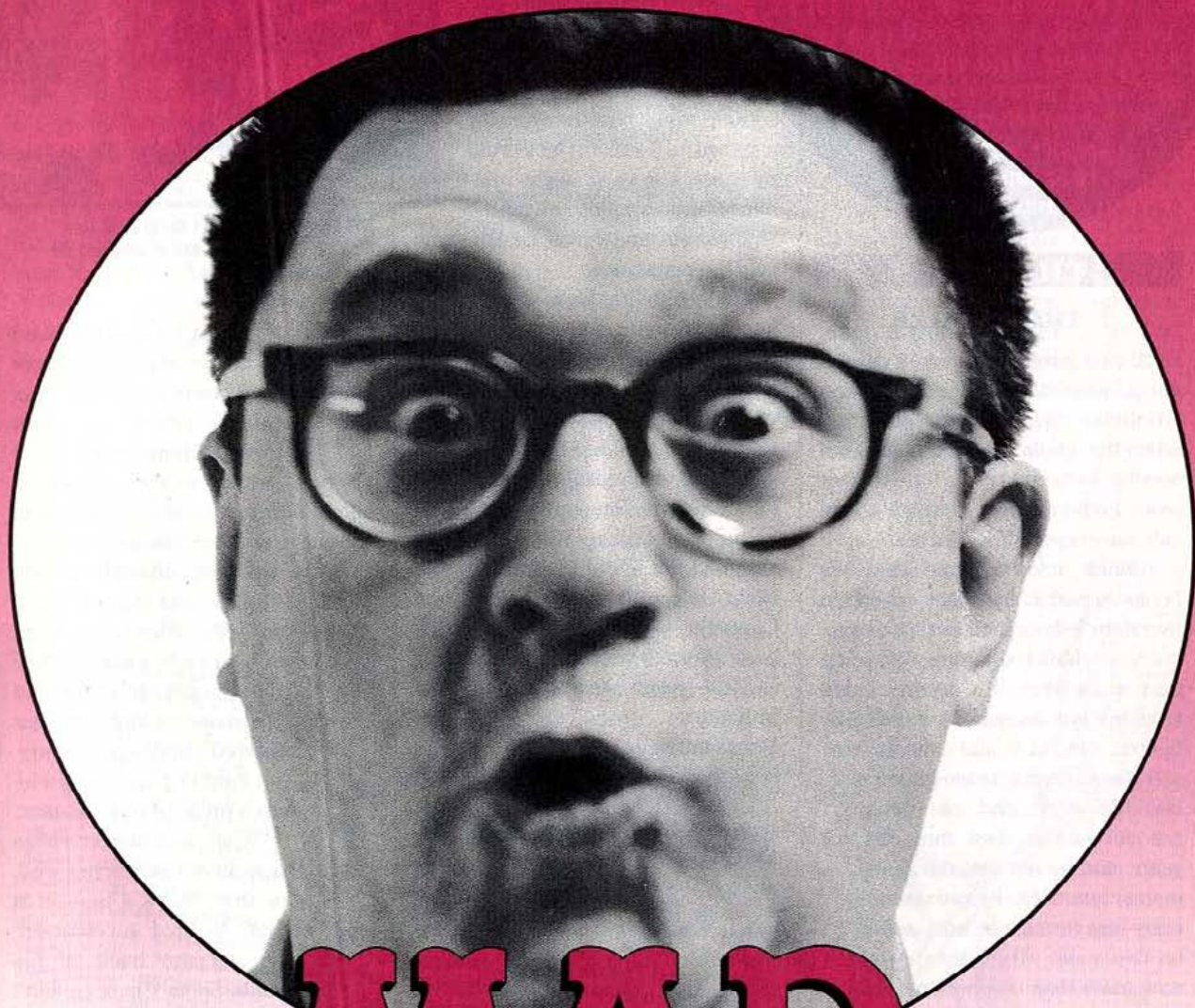


Many of our readers consider Frank Jacobs' *The Mad World of William M. Gaines* to be the definitive narrative of Bill Gaines' life and his E.C. empire. Scarce and long out of print, the book chronicles the Gaines era through 1972.

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



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

THE STORY SO FAR

We've profiled the personalities and work habits of Gaines and his in-house staffers. E.C. has been transformed, with horror and crime comics replacing the tamer titles Gaines inherited after his father's death. We've sat in plot sessions with Gaines and Al Feldstein. And we've looked at Gaines' stormy relationship with his father, his unique rapport with his mother and his two marriages.

CHAPTER 7

THE AX FALLS

"If you keep your horror comics going," predicted good friend William Woolfolk, "you're going to bring down the whole industry. I hate censorship, but even I get a little uneasy when I read a comic in which a man eats the corpse of his fiancée."

Gaines acknowledged that his books occasionally might appear to overstep the boundaries of good taste, but he couldn't see getting worked up over it. He knew his horror empire wouldn't last forever. Eventually, he figured, the fad would exhaust itself and die a natural, unbloodied death. He, his staff, and his bank account had enjoyed three fat years, and he felt that the sheer momentum of his success would carry him through at least a year or two more. True, there were now more than one hundred imitations of his horror and suspense books glutting the newsstands. True, the New York Legislature annually tried to push through a bill banning these kinds of comics. But his magazines were holding their own, and Governor

Thomas E. Dewey had vetoed every anticomics bill that crossed his desk.



What Gaines didn't count on was the temper of the times. This was 1953, the heart of the McCarthy era, and the country was in a repressive mood. Each month, a few more letters of disapproval arrived from outraged parents or American Legion posts. Now and then a church magazine or a P.T.A. group would beat the drum for a return to Donald Duck. And there were ever so slight rumblings of discontent among the wholesalers and news dealers who sold the magazines.

Oddly, the first blow struck in the name of Goodness and Decency was not against horror. The blow fell on Gaines's new humor comic, *Panic*, which he started as a sister publication to MAD. Edited by the indefatigable one, Al Feldstein, *Panic* made its debut in December, 1953. To honor the season, Will Elder was assigned the job of illustrating "The Night Before Christmas." Never had Clement Clarke Moore's classic been adorned with such unusual art, and the result was an outburst of indignation from the state of Massachusetts. Cried the *Springfield Daily News*:

SANTA CLAUS COMIC DRAWS HOLYOKE BAN

Holyoke, Dec. 19—A comic book described by Atty. Gen. George Fingold as "desecrating Christmas," has been dropped from sale by the Holyoke News Co., local distributing agency, reported Martin Zanger, owner, today. Councilor Patrick J. Sonny McDonough, of the Governor's Council, said the book showed Santa Claus riding a sled bearing a "just divorced" sign, and that a meat cleaver, ash can and two daggers were tied to the rear of the sled.

The Holyoke story was followed in the Daily News by a second article:

Boston, Dec. 19 (AP) — Action has been taken by Atty. Gen. George Fingold to stop sale of a new comic book, "Panic," which he said depicts the night before Christmas in a "pagan" manner. State Police Capt. Joseph Crescio and Fingold conferred yesterday on steps to shut off distribution of the book after the Governor's Council requested the book be banned.

HIS CHEEKS WERE LIKE ROSES, HIS NOSE LIKE A CHERRY.



Will Elder's depiction of Santa Claus was assailed by politicians and newspapers for "desecrating Christmas."

A hornet's nest had been stirred up, with the result that *Panic* attained a distinction greater than Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Not only was it banned in Boston, it was banned in the entire state of Massachusetts.

From the ultra-liberal vantage point of today, the Santa Claus affair seems a Victorian relic. But in 1953 much of America was holding fast to hallowed traditions and showing a distrust of anything that smeared church or country. And Santa Claus, of course, was a pillar of both houses.

"What we didn't realize back then," Gaines has said, "is that Santa Claus is a saint. We put a 'divorced' sign on the back of his sleigh. Santa Claus couldn't have been married, although it runs to my mind that I've seen pictures of Santa and Mrs. Claus up in their workshop with the elves."

At the time, Gaines was outraged and retaliated with a three-pronged counter-attack. First, he conferred with his new attorney, Martin Scheiman, who told the *New York Times* that the action was a "gross insult to the intelligence of the Massachusetts people."

"Every reasoning adult knows that there just isn't any Santa Claus," Scheiman declared, then charged that Gaines had suffered "wanton damage" to his interests so that censors could "come to the rescue of a wholly imaginary, mythological creature rarely believed to exist by children more than a few years old."

Next Gaines decided that if Massachusetts didn't want *Panic*, then *Panic* didn't want Massachusetts. He pulled all copies out of the state and vowed never to sell them there again.

Gaines's third move was concocted by business manager Lyle Stuart and made more grist for the newspapers. reported the *Boston Daily Globe*:

STATE BANS 'NIGHT BEFORE'

PUBLISHER YANKS BIBLE TALES

A New York comic book publisher said last night that he was halting circulation of Biblical picture stories in Massachusetts because of the Bay State's ban on his cartoon version of "The Night Before Christmas." William Gaines said he was taking the Biblical picture books off this state's book stands as a "retaliatory measure."

Gaines was referring, of course, to *Picture Stories From The Bible*, which he had inherited from his father. Pulling them out of Massachusetts seemed an appropriate gesture, but for one minor detail, which the

Springfield Union soon reported:

BIBLE STORY BOOK PUBLISHER TO WITHDRAW IS LONG GONE

The two "Picture Stories from the Bible" comic books which a New York publisher said will be withdrawn from Massachusetts haven't been sold in Springfield for at least five years, distributor Samuel Black said yesterday.

The Bible books hadn't been sold on newsstands anywhere for five years. They were, for all purposes, defunct. The hoax provided an interval of comic relief but didn't stop the defenders of Decency from completing their self-appointed rounds. A few days later, *Panic* was attacked again, this time by the New York City police.

The furor was not over Santa Claus. It was caused by a Mickey Spillane take-off, "My Gun Is The Jury," written by Feldstein and illustrated by Jack Davis. Spurred by an anti-*Panic* article in the *New York World Telegram and Sun*, the police descended on the EC office and bought a copy of the magazine. Stuart told Gaines to stay out of sight. The police arrested Stuart and booked him on the charge of selling "disgusting literature. If convicted, he faced a possible year in prison."

The American Civil Liberties Union urged attorney Scheiman not to wage an all-out defense until the case reached a higher court, but Scheiman saw no reason to wait. He argued the case in the lower court so effectively that the judge, in Gaines's words, "threw it out as the most stupid G*damn thing he'd ever heard of."

Pondering the affair today, Gaines shakes his head in wonder and says, "This wasn't pornography. This wasn't even a nudist magazine. It was *Panic* Number One. But this

was what was going on back then. When you think of it now, you can't believe it."

It was only the beginning. In early 1954, the *Hartford Courant* unleashed a two-month editorial crusade against "Depravity for Children." The depravity, not unexpectedly, was the diet of horror and violence that tots were digesting in their comic book fare. The series assailed many publishers, among them Gaines, his latest issue of *Tales From The Crypt* (formerly *The Crypt of Terror*), being singled out as particularly offensive:

The first story is about adultery and murder. The second story is about a man who drowns his best friend in order to steal his best friend's girl. The third features a homicidal maniac and his sister who are boiled to death in hot water. The final story opens with a sadist torturing animals to death, then turns to murder with a butcher knife and an ax and ends with the killer being burned to death in a flaming car.

According to the *Courant*, it had been deluged with letters supporting its crusade. Only one reader had expressed an opposing view, and that was Gaines.

Accusing the *Courant*, founded in 1764, of "ethical senility," he declared that he had been counseled by the reporter who interviewed him. "The young man was made welcome at our office, as are all people who inquire of our books. We made no attempt to deceive or soft-soap or cloud any issues," Gaines said. "The last thing your young reporter said to me was 'Don't get excited when you see the beginning of the series. It'll be pretty bad. They want it that way. Then we're going to offer the argument for comic books.'"

The *Courant* put down any idea of censoring comic books. Not censor-





The Senate committee investigating comic books was out for blood. Bill Gaines (testifying voluntarily) was their sacrificial lamb.

ship but public "diligence" was the answer to "the filthy stream that flows from gold-plated sewers in New York." To Gaines, this was utter nonsense. Because of the *Courant's* crusade, the Hartford distributors were refusing to handle his comics, and if this wasn't censorship, then he was Frankenstein's bride.

"With comic-book censorship now a fact in Hartford, I look forward to an immediate drop in the crime rate in that fair city," Gaines told the *Courant*. "I trust that there will now be fewer wife-beatings, fewer robberies, fewer grafting politicians, and perhaps it is not too much to hope that, free from the 'evil' influence of comics, there will be fewer dishonest reporters."

Where would it all end, this hullabaloo over horror? It had already reached the *Reader's Digest*, whose zillion readers were made aware of the menace in an article by a *Courant* editor. And if Connecticut's Senator William A. Purtell had his way, the matter would be investigated by the Senate Judiciary Committee. Inquiries were made. Yes, the committee agreed, it would be a splendid idea, dovetailing their present probe into juvenile delinquency. True, the probe

would never match the nation's current big attraction, the Army-McCarthy

hearings, but it might have the makings of a lower-budget, terror-laden second feature.

As the Senators prepared to investigate, Gaines appealed to his readers for support. His method was unusual. Years earlier, Paul Kast had told Gaines about a fascist Kast had seen making a soapbox speech. Someone in the crowd called the speaker a Communist, which drove

the fascist up a wall. After all, no fascist ever wants to be called a Communist. Gaines felt that the people who were attacking him and his comics were fascists. So why not really annoy them and call them Communists?

Working with Stuart, he concocted a full-page editorial entitled "Are You A Red Dupe?" and ran it in each of his horror and suspense magazines:

ARE YOU A RED DUPE?

IN THE TOWN OF GAZDOOSKY IN THE HEART OF SOVIET RUSSIA, YOUNG MELVIN BUZUKIN - SKOVITZKY PUBLISHED A COMIC MAGAZINE...

...SO THEY CAME AND SMASHED HIS FOUR-COLOR PRESS...

...AND HUNG POOR MELVIN THE NEXT MORNING!

• HERE IN AMERICA, WE CAN STILL PUBLISH COMIC MAGAZINES, NEWSPAPERS, SUCKS, BOOKS AND THE BIBLE. WE DON'T HAVE TO SEND THEM TO A CENSOR FIRST. NOT YET...

• BUT THERE ARE SOME PEOPLE IN AMERICA WHO WOULD LIKE TO CENSOR... WHO WOULD LIKE TO SUPPRESS COMICS. IT ISN'T THAT THEY DON'T LIKE COMICS FOR THEM! THEY DON'T LIKE THEM FOR YOU!

• THESE PEOPLE SAY THAT COMIC BOOKS AREN'T AS GOOD FOR CHILDREN AS NO COMIC BOOKS OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT. SOME OF THESE PEOPLE ARE NO-GOODS. SOME ARE DO-GOODERS. SOME ARE WELL-MEANING. AND SOME ARE JUST PLAIN MEAN.

• BUT WE ARE CONCERNED WITH AN AMAZING REVELATION. AFTER MUCH SEARCHING OF NEWSPAPER FILES, WE'VE MADE AN ASTONISHING DISCOVERY:

THE GROUP MOST ANXIOUS TO DESTROY COMICS ARE THE COMMUNISTS!

• WE'RE SERIOUS! NO KIDDIN'! HERE! READ THIS:

THE COMMUNIST "DAILY WORKER" OF JULY 15, 1953 BITTERLY ATTACKED THE ROLE OF:

...SO-CALLED 'COMICS' IN BRUTALIZING AMERICAN YOUTH, THE BETTER TO PREPARE THEM FOR MILITARY SERVICE IN IMPLEMENTING OUR GOVERNMENT'S AIMS OF WORLD DOMINATION, AND TO ACCEPT THE ATROCITIES NOW BEING PERPETRATED BY AMERICAN SOLDIERS AND AIRMEN IN KOREA UNDER THE FLAG OF THE UNITED NATIONS."

THIS ARTICLE ALSO QUOTED GERSON LEGMAN (WHO CLAIMS TO BE A GHOST WRITER FOR DR. FREDERICK WERTHAM, THE AUTHOR OF A RECENT SNEAR AGAINST COMICS PUBLISHED IN THE LADIES HOME JOURNAL). THE SAME G. LEGMAN, IN ISSUE # 3 OF "NEUROLOGIA" PUBLISHED IN AUTUMN 1948, HILDERY CONDEMNED COMICS, ALTHOUGH ADMITTING THAT:

"THE CHILD'S NATURAL CHARACTER... MUST BE DISTORTED TO FIT CIVILIZATION... FANTASY VIOLENCE WILL PARALYZE HIS RESISTANCE, OVERSTRESS HIS AGGRESSION TO UNREAL ENEMIES AND FRUSTRATIONS, AND IN THIS WAY PREVENT HIM FROM REBELLING AGAINST PARENTS AND TEACHERS... THIS WILL SIPHON OFF HIS RESISTANCE AGAINST SOCIETY, AND PREVENT REVOLUTION."

• SO THE NEXT TIME SOME JOKER GETS UP AT A P.T.A. MEETING, OR STARTS JABBERING ABOUT THE "NAUGHTY COMIC BOOKS" AT YOUR LOCAL CANDY STORE, GIVE HIM THE ONCE OVER, WERE NOT SAYING HE IS A COMMUNIST! HE MAY BE INNOCENT OF THE WHOLE THING! HE MAY BE A DUPE! HE MAY NOT EVEN READ THE "DAILY WORKER"! IT'S JUST THAT HE'S SWALLOWED THE RED BAIT... HOOK, LINE, AND SINKER!





Whenever anyone wrote Gaines a letter attacking his comics, he sent them a tearsheet of his Red Dupe ad. "It was all pretty dopey," he admits. "I made up the ad out of devilishness. It was supposed to be a spoof, but it didn't come off that way."

Not to the *Hartford Courant*, certainly, which devoted an entire editorial to the Red Dupe ad. "Thus do the sellers of literary sewage justify their profits from the debauch of youth," inveighed the newspaper. "But the jig is up for the panders of dirty comic books, and this Red scare is a frantic rear-guard action from a discredited and soon-to-be-deactivated phase of publishing. Their end is in sight, and they know it."

A week before the Senate hearings were to start, Lyle Stuart said to Gaines, "Bill, there'll be a lot of people testifying against the comics. Somebody should testify for them and I think it should be you." Gaines agreed and asked the committee if he could appear as a voluntary witness. The committee was delighted to have him.

The hearings were staged at the Federal Courthouse on New York's Foley Square. Twenty-five people — publishers, editors, distributors, and juvenile delinquency experts — paraded before the Senators. The lawmakers paid special attention to Dr. Frederic Wertham, a psychia-

trist and the self-confessed arch-foe of horror and crime comics. Wertham had just written *Seduction of the Innocent*, a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, much of which linked the ruination of children with the reading of comics.

But the star of the proceedings was Gaines. He and Stuart had stayed up the entire previous night preparing an opening statement, parts of which follow:

"I was the first publisher in the United States to publish horror comics.

"I am responsible, I started them. Some may not like them. That is a matter of personal taste. It would be just as difficult to explain the harmless thrill of a horror story to Dr. Wertham as it would be to explain the sublimity of love to a frigid old maid.

"Our American children are for the most part normal children. They are bright children, but those who want to prohibit comic magazines seem to see dirty, sneaky, perverted monsters who use the comics as a

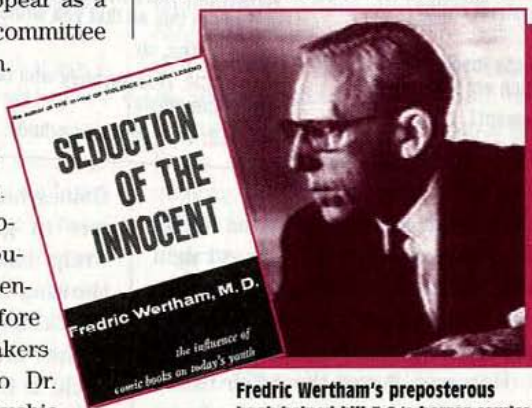
blueprint for action. Perverted little monsters are few and far between. They don't read comics.

"What are we afraid of? Are we afraid of our own children? Do we forget they are citizens, too, and entitled to select what to read or do? Do we think our children are so evil, so simple-minded, that it takes a story of murder to set them to murder, a story of robbery to set them to robbery?

"Jimmy Walker once remarked that he never knew a girl to be ruined by a book. Nobody has ever been ruined by a comic."

During the time of the hearings, Gaines was on a diet that required him to take Dexedrine. Anyone who has taken the drug knows that it does more than curb one's appetite. It sharpens one's reflexes and keeps one awake. When the drug wears off, a dulling, depressing fatigue often sets in and one craves sleep. Gaines had taken a Dexedrine early on the morning of the hearings, but the scheduled time for his testimony was delayed, and midway through his appearance the drug began to wear off. He recalls:

"At the beginning, I felt that I was really going to fix those bastards, but as time went on I could feel myself fading away. I was like a punch-drunk fighter. They were pelting me with questions and I couldn't locate the answers."



Fredric Wertham's preposterous book helped kill E.C.'s horror comics.

VIDEO CAPTURE: DAVID P. LEVIN



1 I have listened to the recordings of the hearings. Gaines sounds the same throughout. But there is a difference between sounds and substance. He performed well at the beginning, in these exchanges with Senator Thomas C. Hennings (D., Mo.) and Herbert Hannoch and Herbert Beaser, the committee investigators:

HENNINGS: Is that one of your series, the pictures of the two in the electric chair, the little girl down in the corner?

GAINES: Yes.

HENNINGS: What would be your judgment or conclusion as to the identification of the reader with that little girl, who has, to use the phrase, framed her mother and shot her father?

GAINES: You will see that the child leads a miserable life for seven and six-sevenths pages. It is only on the last page that she emerges triumphant.

HENNINGS [With irony]: As a result of murder and perjury, she emerges triumphant.

GAINES [Unshaken]: That's right. This is fiction.

HANNOCH [Scoffing]: That's the O. Henry finish!

GAINES: Yes.

HANNOCH [Still scoffing]: In other words, everybody reading that until the last picture would think this girl was gonna go to jail. So the O. Henry ending changes that and makes her a wonderful looking gal!



2 So far, so good, but then came the encounter that has become famed among horror buffs as *The Affair of the Severed Head*. The interlude introduced Gaines to Senator Estes Kefauver (D. Tenn.), who, two years earlier in the same courthouse, has emerged as a coonskin Galahad during his televised investigation of organized crime:

BEASER: Is the sole test of what you put into your magazines whether it sells? Is there any limit of what you wouldn't put in a magazine because you thought a child shouldn't see or read about it?

GAINES: No, I wouldn't say there is any limit for the reason you outlined. My only limits are bounds of good taste, what I consider good taste.

BEASER [Probing]: Then you think a child cannot in any way, shape, or manner, be hurt by anything that the child reads or sees?

GAINES: I do not believe so.

BEASER [Still probing]: There would be no limit actually to what you'd put in the magazines?

GAINES: Only within the bounds of good taste.

KEFAUVER [Doubtful]: Here is your May issue. This seems to be a man with a bloody ax holding a woman's head up which has

3 Despite the onslaught, Gaines was sticking to his guns (and axes and crowbars) and was holding his ground. His answers, if somewhat startling, were, at least, candid and reasonably grammatical. It was toward the end of his testimony that he began to slip:

HANNOCH: Do you know anything about this sheet called, "Are You a Red Dupe?"

GAINES: Yes, sir, I wrote it. It is going to be the inside front cover ad on five of my comic magazines which are forthcoming.

HANNOCH: And it's going to be an advertisement?

GAINES: Not an advertisement. It's an editorial.

GAINES: No one knows she did it until the last panel.

HANNOCH [Incredulous]: And you think it does the children lots of good to read these things!

GAINES [With vigor]: I don't think it does them a bit of good, sir, but I don't think it does them a bit of harm, either.

BEASER: Were you here this morning when Dr. Peck [a psychiatrist for Children's Court in New York City] testified?

GAINES: I was.

BEASER: Did you listen to his testimony as to the possible effect of these comics upon an emotionally maladjusted child?

GAINES: I heard it.

BEASER: You disagree with it?

GAINES: I disagree with it. Frankly, I could have brought many, many quotes from psychiatrists and child-welfare experts and so forth pleading the cause of the comic magazine. I did not do so because I figured this would all be covered thoroughly before I got here and it would just end up in a big melee of pitting expert against expert.

been severed from her body. Do you think that's in good taste?

GAINES: Yes, sir, I do - for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little higher so that the blood could be seen dripping from it, and moving the body over a little further so that the neck of the body could be seen to be bloody. [Murmurs, stirring among spectators]

KEFAUVER [Still doubtful]: You've got blood coming out of her mouth.

GAINES: A little.

KEFAUVER: And here's blood on the ax. I think most adults are shocked by that. Now here's a man with a woman in a boat and he's choking her to death with a crowbar. Is that in good taste?

GAINES: I think so.

HANNOCH: How could it be worse?

HENNINGS [To the rescue]: Mr. Chairman, I don't think it is really the function of our committee to argue with this gentleman.

HANNOCH: You believe the things that you say in this ad that you wrote?

GAINES: Yes, sir.

HANNOCH: That anybody who is anxious to destroy comics are Communists?

GAINES: True, but not anybody. Just the group most anxious.

Gaines didn't believe it for a minute. The editorial was pure spoofery and he should have said so. But the grilling had eroded his self-confidence, and the Dexedrine wearing off had

made him woozy. He was tired, scared, and couldn't think straight and wound up creating the impression that he was some kind of Red-baiting, horror-sated McCarthyite.

However, it was the Affair of the Severed Head that caught the fancy of the press. The odd fact was that

Gaines had run the cover as a gesture of good taste. Artist Johnny Craig had brought in the cover showing the severed head with the neck dripping blood just beneath it. Gaines ordered Craig to delete the neck, it being too gory even for a horror magazine.

The newspapers had a field day.



Newsday described Gaines as having "the detached manner of a surgeon after a hard day at the autopsy table." *The Hartford Courant*, ever vigilant, ran an editorial titled "Men of Taste," calling Gaines "a man to be pitied as well as censured," and suggested that "Gaines's loss would be the country's gain." Even Walter Winchell got into the act, the columnist inaccurately quoting Kefauver as saying that it was Gaines who had blood dripping from his mouth.

Gaines left the courthouse in a state of shock. He took to his bed for two days with a painfully knotted stomach, most likely psychosomatic. He was especially bothered by a column written by Max Lerner, a journalist whom Gaines had long revered. Wrote Lerner:

"The high point of the day was William M. Gaines, publisher of *Entertaining Comics*, who — had he not shown up in the Foley Square courtroom — would have had to be invented by a dramatist and played by Paul Douglas. (Lerner undoubtedly was referring to the role of Harry Brock, the loutish junk tycoon, whom Douglas portrayed on Broadway in *Born Yesterday*.)

"When Gaines defended as 'good taste' a particularly gory comic book cover, showing the severed head of a woman held aloft by a man with an ax, he was saying that every publisher of comic books is a moral as well as an esthetic law unto himself. This means that society is a jungle — a proposition we cannot accept."

At EC the strain was showing. The hearings brought forth no legislation, but more and more wholesalers were refusing to touch horror. Gaines and Feldstein had lost some of their rapport, and Feldstein moved into a private office on another floor. Larry Stark, whom EC considered its top fan, has recalled the final days:



Bill and Al were getting a little worn thin from the constant demand for stories. Their frazzled imaginations, plus the income-curve which dipped steadily... made writing an unpleasant chore. Feldstein fell back into doing ingeniously original descriptions of gruesome scenes, caring less and less for any objective or any personal standards of excellence. The whole industry was overstocked with horror, and even those who had once poured more art than blood into their writing could no longer think of artfully conceived stories. When the industry came under official scrutiny, they had no defense. Looking over issues, it's almost possible to point out precisely where everyone stopped caring how good their work was. Almost everything seems the same, but the soul is missing.

Gaines was fighting a one-man battle. Other publishers refused to back him up. "The outfits that copied us did nothing to help," recalls Feldstein. "Meanwhile the movie industry was enjoying a big laugh at our expense. They were coming out with horror films that made our stuff look like fairy tales."

A few weeks after the hearings, Gaines tried to rally his fellow publishers. The plan was to start a new comic association that would act as an action group. It would work with educators and psychologists to find out if there really was a link between

The severed head from the cover of *Crime Suspense Stories* #22. A defiant Bill Gaines could not convince a Senate panel it was within the bounds of good taste.



horror and crime and juvenile delinquency. It would employ a public relations staff to reclaim the public's shattered faith in comic books. Finally, it would protect publishers against the specter of censorship.

Gaines hired Wendell Willkie Hall for the first meeting. He was happily surprised when nine publishers showed

(Continued on page 70)

