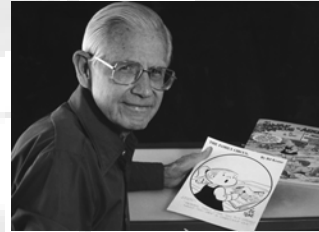




**BILL KEANE**  
1922-2011

1992  
The Family Circus™ Creator and Artist



The following is an oral history interview with Bil Keane (**BK**) conducted by Zona Davis Lorig (**ZL**) for Historical League, Inc. on November 12, 1991 at Mr. Keane's home in Paradise Valley, Arizona.

*Transcripts for website edited by members of Historical League, Inc.*

*Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Historical Society Museum Library at Papago Park, Tempe, Arizona.*

**ZL:** Mr. Keane, I want to thank you very much for agreeing to this interview for the AHS's oral history collection. Oral history is an important way of preserving our culture and learning about the history of our residents. Would you please begin by telling us when, if you want to, and where you were born and something about your early life?

**BK:** Sure, well first of all it's a pleasure for me to be able to expound on Bil Keane, his private life, *The Family Circus*, and all of my career for the purpose of the Arizona Historical Society's archives. It's an honor to be a part of it. To answer your question, I was born in Philadelphia on October 5, 1922. I think my next door neighbor was Benjamin Franklin at the time. I grew up there in Philadelphia. I went to grammar school and high school. The high school I went to was Northeast Catholic High School. I always had a leaning toward drawing; I liked to draw cartoons. I never had any formal training really; I just taught myself to draw when I was a kid in grammar school. About sixth grade, one of the nuns said "We'll give William Keane a place to do his drawing, so we're going to start a newspaper" and she made me the editor of the newspaper. So naturally the editor wasn't going to reject any of the cartoons that I did. That was my first taste of newspaper work. I started drawing cartoons then of the teachers, some of the kids, the policeman that was outside the school and various things that got me a little notoriety. I loved the way people took notice of me because of these cartoons.

When I got into high school, the first thing I did was try and draw some cartoons for a publication there, which was a real publication that had printing done in the professional way. It wasn't just a mimeograph sheet. I started submitting cartoons and they started reproducing them. I saw them in print and that really

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gave me the urge to go ahead and have more people see my cartoons in print. I became editor of that magazine and art editor of the yearbook. All through my high school years, I'd be at home and instead of spending time doing homework, I spent my time copying cartoons out of the magazines, imitating the cartoonists who I admired.

**ZL:** Who were they?

**BK:** Most of them were from *The New Yorker* magazine: George Price, Robert Day, Richard Decker, Shaun Day, and Peter Arno. There are a number of what I consider classic cartoonists at that time. I would keep drawing one cartoonist's style until I felt I was drawing like him and then I would go on to another one. At the same time, I was a constant nuisance to all of the professional cartoonists. I would write to them and ask for an original cartoon, if they could send it to me, which some of them did and I treasured them. In fact, I still have some of them and I finally developed my own style of drawing. After I graduated from high school, I went right to work for *The Philadelphia Bulletin*, hoping to get into the art department. They didn't have an opening in the art department for an inexperienced young kid, so I got a job as a messenger where I delivered proofs from the advertising department to all of the stores, the advertisers, and the agencies. But that gave me the opportunity to get into the art department and sit down on a waste basket along side of the cartoonist who was working there and see how the real artists worked.

Then World War II came along in 1941. In 1942, I was drafted into the Army and went overseas to Australia. In fact, while I was in basic training in Alabama and all through my stateside Army career, I drew cartoons about the G.I.s who were in the barracks with me and about the officers and aboard ship going overseas. I drew cartoons while I was in Australia. For two years I was stationed in Brisbane, Australia. In fact, that's where I met my wife. When I met her, she was a young girl working for the US Army. She was an Australian civilian and I visited her family and got to know her. Three years later, after the war was over in 1948, I went back to Australia and married her there. But while I was in Australia in the Army, I drew cartoons for *Yank Magazine* and a number of other of Army type publications. I finally went on up to Manila and did cartoons on the *Daily Pacifican*. I wound up as a staff artist on *Stars and Stripes* in Tokyo where I did a daily cartoon called *At Ease with the Japanese*. It was a daily look at the occupation troops in Japan.

**ZL:** How long were you in Japan?

**BK:** I was only there for about four months from September until December of 1945; then I was rotated back to the United States and got my honorable discharge out of the Army. I was a technical sergeant at the time.

Then I turned in my application at *The Bulletin* again to try to get into the art department. This time I had a bunch of clippings of my cartoons that I had done and in addition to doing the cartoons in the Army, I



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had done a lot of standup comedy. We had a band in the First Cavalry Division and the First Cavalry Band was one of the finest bands in the country; we put on shows and I emceed in front of the band. We had comedians and dancers, instrumentalists and everything else that goes along with the talent that's drafted into a wartime army. So I had illusions of a career, perhaps in radio. I had even done some disc jockey work in Manila; and while I was aboard troop ships, I would put on a program every day. I would read the news that would come in over the wire services and I would do the introductions of the records and all the latest hits, of course Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey Bands, Nat King Cole and the various things that were popular at that time. So I thought I might like a career in that. I applied in Philadelphia after I came out of the Army for a job at the radio station, hoping that maybe I could get my foot in the door there. I did that at the same time I applied for the job at *The Bulletin* in the art department. I thought, whichever one comes through I'll take. The job at *The Bulletin* opened up and I was hired as a staff artist where under the G.I. bill I learned to retouch pictures, draw maps and do things for a newspaper. I got an opportunity to do little spot cartoons and illustrate some of the columns that were running. That's where my cartooning career as a professional really started.

If I had gotten a job at the radio station, I don't know where I would have wound up. At the time that I was looking for a job there, Ed McMahon was just starting at WCAU in Philadelphia as an embryo announcer. Also at the same time, Dick Clark was starting on WFIL, the ABC station where he started *American Bandstand*. There were a number of people who showed up in show business later on who were just getting off the ground and I would probably have been among them going into radio and then possibly into television.

I don't know whether my career would parallel what I've done in the cartoon field, but cartooning was it and I jumped in with both feet and started drawing features for *The Philadelphia Bulletin*. I had a Sunday comic *Silly Philly* based on William Penn who was the founder of Philadelphia. The character was a little Quaker character. I started a feature called the *Fun Book*. I was editor of that, which was a tabloid supplement that came out with the Sunday paper for kids. There were games and puzzles and jokes. I did all of this myself every week. It was a monumental task, but I was just really taken up with the idea of doing all kinds of cartoons and features.

I decided I would try to even sell some free-lance cartoons. I found time to rough out cartoons and submit them to the magazines; *The Saturday Evening Post* was in Philadelphia. I would mail my stuff into the New York based magazines and I started selling. In fact, I sold to almost all the major magazines, selling cartoons about whatever subjects the general family, home life subjects that I was drawing cartoons about. Then I also noticed in the newspapers that they were devoting more space to listing television shows, television logs and it was a very deadly looking thing with just numbers and letters. There was no artwork to illustrate that or to lighten it. I tried a syndicated feature. I roughed out some ideas for a feature called *Channel Chuckles* and I took it to a syndicate. The Des Moines Register and Tribune Syndicate decided they would take it out and sell it, which they did and we were in a couple hundred newspapers with



*Channel Chuckles*. There was a character in there called Antenna who had a hairdo like an antenna and her antitheses of the antenna was Dim Viewer, a guy that just hated TV. The cartoon finally got to be the tail that wagged the dog.

I was working a nine to five job at *The Bulletin* doing this free-lance stuff, doing the features and the *Channel Chuckles*. I decided that I didn't have to have the nine to five job if I devoted as much time at home working in my own studio. I could probably sell just as many cartoons to equal the pay I was getting from *The Bulletin*, so I decided that I would leave *The Bulletin*. We bought a piece of land out in Bucks County, outside Philadelphia in Sellersville, and we were planning to build a house there. We had the plans for the house, but they hadn't broken ground yet.

I had always been bothered with allergies. I would start sneezing with hay fever in the springtime, or I guess it was rose fever then, and in the fall I would have this hay fever that would make me sneeze, then all summer long . . . I was married in 1948; I went to Australia and brought Thel back with me. We bought a little home in Roslyn, Pennsylvania, right outside Philadelphia. Being from Australia, Thel had no real roots in Philadelphia. I had my family there, but the doctor I was going to said, "You know, you're a damn fool. If you're going to build a house and these allergies bother you, why don't you try building a home in an area that has less pollen, less allergies?" I said, "Where?" He said, "There's Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Southern California." So I thought, gee I'd never been to any of those. I was through California in the Army, but had never been to the rest. At *The Bulletin*, they had a subscription to *Arizona Highways Magazine* and I had seen these beautiful pictures of Arizona, just gorgeous pictures and I said to Thel, "Let's see what Arizona's like." So, we held up on building the home. It was 1958, around Halloween it was, that we came out here and spent a week.

**ZL:** Did you fly?

**BK:** Yeah, we flew out for a week's vacation and we stayed at the Safari Hotel in Scottsdale, which was the only hotel there at the time. I stopped down at *The Arizona Republic* which carried my feature *Channel Chuckles*. I talked to the managing editor who was Oren Pfeifer at the time and I told him that we were looking for a house here. In fact, before I came out here I phoned and talked to Reg Manning, who was a member of the National Cartoonist Society and was the editorial cartoonist on *The Republic*. I asked him where he would recommend we look and he said he thought we would be happiest in the Scottsdale area around Camelback Mountain. So that's the reason we came to Scottsdale and started looking. Pfeifer at *The Republic* had an interview with me and put a huge story in the paper with a big headline that said, "Syndicated Cartoonist House Hunting Here." Well, the switchboard at the Safari lit up like a Christmas tree and every real estate person in the area said, "Don't do a thing; we have the perfect house for you." Our stipulations were that we didn't want to be in too much desert because I was used to the greenery of Philadelphia, so we wanted to be in the green area. We didn't want to be too far from a Catholic school for the kids and the house should be in the \$25,000 range, which was about what we could afford at the time.





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A very, very discerning real estate man, a guy named Lloyd Snook with Clevenger Realty at the time, came and he said, "Now here's what I have to show you." He had photos and we sat on the edge of the bed and he showed us these houses and one of them was this very house that we live in. He said, "This house is out of your range. They're asking \$42,500 for this house, but it's just been built. A guy name Ross Schoeback built it. It's not exactly . . . but we'll take a look at it before we see these other houses that I'm going to show you." We stopped by and looked at this house and it was just, to us, a dream house. It was sitting by itself on an unlandscaped desert lot. No houses were around here at all. The nearest thing was the Franciscan Renewal Center and Camelback Inn to the west of us was the only thing there. Mummy Mountain was just a virgin mountain with cholla cactus and everything else growing on it. We went and looked at all of these houses. They took us to the areas in North Phoenix up on North Central Avenue, in the Camelback head some little homes just off of 44th Street that were being built, but in the back of our minds, we kept thinking of this house. We finally said, "Let's go back and look at that." So we came back out and within two days we got the house, as long as they would put in a lawn. Thel wanted a lawn for the kids and a fence around it. They wanted to fix up what was supposed to be a maid's quarters as a studio for me on the other side of the house. We bought the house for \$40,000. We got a second mortgage and we managed to go over to Mesa to a Barrows and buy some dining room and bedroom furniture. We got carpeting for the house. We enrolled the kids at Our Lady of Perpetual Help School in Scottsdale and went back to Philadelphia.

Thel sold the house, sold the car, sold the furniture, sold everything but the kids and we put them on a plane over their Christmas vacation. On January 4, 1959, we got off the plane at Sky Harbor Airport and rented a car to drive out here. We'd been telling the kids what a beautiful place this was, beautiful sunshine, blue sky. We got off the plane and it was pouring rain. We came out and moved into this house and we've been here ever since. Of course, I think the house has appreciated a bit in value since then. I built this studio onto the house. It has the windows overlooking Camelback Mountain.

I've spent almost every day for the last 31, 32 years sitting right here drawing *The Family Circus*. I hadn't started *The Family Circus* when we came here. I was doing free-lance stuff and *Channel Chuckles* and some of the features for *The Bulletin*, which I continued to mail in. I realized, after working at home for a while, that I was drawing so many cartoons about the kids who were underfoot and they were selling to the magazines. I thought I could do a second feature about a family in addition to *Channel Chuckles* which might bring in some more income and help pay off that second mortgage. In order to make it look a little bit different, I put it in a circle rather than the usual square or rectangle and I called it *The Family Circle*. I took it to the syndicate, they took it out and we had 19 newspapers that took it initially. It started February, 29, 1960, which looking back was a substantial start but hardly enough for a family to live on. It gradually built and we got more and more newspapers until now we're in over 1,400 newspapers all over the world. The feature still shows up as a top rated feature in the readership surveys in most of the newspapers. There's hardly a major market in the United States or Canada that *The Family Circus* wasn't well



ensconced in the major newspaper there.

The cartoon started as *The Family Circle* and about six months after it had been running, the *Family Circle* magazine threatened to sue us because they said it was their title and they didn't want it to be appearing on a newspaper cartoon. We could have fought it in court because the words "the family circle" were public domain having been part of the legitimate theatre in England for many years and the idea of a family around the hearth has gotten to be known as "the family circle," around the dining room table, that type of thing for many years. However, it would have been costly to fight it in court so we just changed the "le" to "us" and made it *The Family Circus*.

**ZL:** How did you decide on *The Family Circus*?

**BK:** Well, I had several options of different names that I was going to do. This was the most unobtrusive and unnoticed change, just change the "le" to "us" and also gave me, to my mind, a license for fun, frivolity, it was more indicative of what was going on in the cartoon than *The Family Circle*, which is more of a serious title. So, it became *The Family Circus* and continued to grow in newspapers. I drew exactly what I saw our kids doing. I based the characters on our own children. At the time we had five children. When we moved out here our daughter Gail was nine years old and she was the model for Dolly. My wife called her Dolly as a nickname when she was small and our son Neil was about seven, Glenn was five, Chris was three, and Jeff, our youngest, was just about a year and one-half old at the time.

When I started the cartoon, I just had Billy, Dolly and Jeffrey in the cartoon. There was no P.J. Billy was in first grade, Dolly was a preschooler and Jeffrey was the baby. But Jeffrey was not an infant in the playpen or in a baby carriage. So after running it for a couple of years, I realized that I had no vehicle for the real infant, the small baby gags, so I thought, gee that might be a great idea to add a baby in the cartoon. Of course, Thel my wife, is my editor, has been for years. Everything I send out of here she looks at and passes on, makes sure that everything is passable from number one, an editorial standpoint and number two, from her vantage point as a mother of a family and housewife and being able to give me some insight as to what I should or shouldn't do in a cartoon that deals so intimately with family life.

I thought of this idea of a baby and the day I thought of it I was sitting right here, and Thel was out in the back yard doing gardening. She usually takes care of the flowers and that type of thing. I ran out to her and said, "Thel, what would you think about adding a baby to the family?" She said, "Well it's all right with me, but could I finish the weeding first?" So I then showed Mommy in the cartoon wearing maternity clothes for a few months and then the baby was born August 1, 1962. When he was brought home from the hospital, they called him P.J., short for Peter John, and he became the fourth child in the cartoon. I couldn't have him laying around in the bassinet his whole life, so I had to have him grow on a slow-motion basis, which I did. I had him gradually grow to where he sat up, and then he learned to walk and grew a little hair. I didn't really have any plan for how I would have him grow; but in addition to having him age, I had to



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have Billy, Dolly and Jeffrey grow. So Billy grew from first grade to second grade and Dolly went from preschool into kindergarten and Jeffrey, instead of a year and one-half old tot, he became a three-year old eventually and P.J. grew up to 18 months old. I decided to freeze them all at that age because that just seemed to be the ideal age for showing the situations and the family happenings that deal with little kids.

So I froze them at that age and they remained there. Now if I could just get that to work for myself, it would be all right! It worked that the family was the inspiration not only for the characters in the cartoon but for all of the ideas as we went along. Alongside my drawing board, I have this slip of paper with little rough cartoons that I've jotted down, these 3x5 slips of paper that are ideas that came to me or I observed as our kids were growing. I still have those I haven't used yet. There's a volume of material that would keep me going for another 31 years but most of the material I'm using today is based on what I remember our kids doing, what I see our grandchildren doing. We have five grandchildren right now; we're expecting a sixth one in March. The ideas that readers send in too come in handy. I get a lot of mail and most of the readers will say, "Here's something that my little boy said" or "Here's something my grandchild said" or it will be from a grandfather who will say, "I remember when my daughter was two years old, she said this." If it rings a bell with me, it will give me the nucleus of an idea that I will draw in the cartoon.

There's an unending source of material for typical family ideas and I try to keep the cartoon up-to-date and topical by including anything that comes along that people have just heard about or are living in their own homes. It keeps the finger on the pulse by observing our own grandchildren; I know what kids are interested in. Ten years ago, I wouldn't have drawn a cartoon about a Nintendo because nobody would know what it was or a cartoon I had in last week where Dolly is saying "Mommy, Jeffrey's harassing me." That wouldn't have been funny without all the information on harassment that's been in the news. Anything that is topical helps let the reader know that this is a 1990s family and not something that's just a cartoon from the 60s.

**ZL:** One of the interesting things to me about your cartoon is how it transcends time and generations; grandparents love it, parents love it and kids love it and that's very hard to do in our society.

**BK:** It is, Zona. The amazing thing is that when I set out to draw the cartoon, I drew it for young married people who have young families just the way we were, and that was my main focus. But the way it has evolved is that keeping it in that framework, those people were interested in seeing what was going on in their own homes or happened last Thursday in their home. Grandparents liked it because it was a touch of nostalgia for them, things that had happened years ago when their kids were little or it was like a daily visit with their little grandchildren who might live 1,000 miles away. The amazing thing to me was that the little kids, little tots, who I wouldn't expect to be fans of *The Family Circus*, latched onto it.

We have over 14 million books in print, paperback books that have been put out by Fawcett and a number of trade books also. Almost all of those mass market paperback books were bought by children between



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seven and 14 years old. When they first started, I think they were seventy-five cents, maybe sixty-five cents. Now they're up to \$2.95 or something for the paperback book. We put out three of them a year. We just signed a new contract to do 10 more of them. It's an ongoing permanent record of the cartoon. When the daily paper is thrown out, it doesn't mean that the cartoon is gone and forgotten; it's put into a permanent bound volume that's on bookshelves. When I make personal appearances, I'm always so gratified to see people come up with a book they bought 15 years ago that's dog-eared and ask for it to be autographed. It's so great to see that it's been used and read and enjoyed.

Another gratification is to hear from young people. I got a letter the other day from a guy in college who was thanking me for *The Family Circus*. He said he learned to read from the books. He said as a little fellow he identified with the situations and his mother read him the captions and he would just keep going through it. He would know what the captions said because it's all kids' language, whatever kids were saying, and he learned those words by reading them over and over again. He was just expressing his gratitude to me for giving him the gift of being able to read as he sees it today. I had a letter from a lady in Indiana who said that she had five preschool children and she was driven up the wall. You know the trapped housewife syndrome, no time for anything and her kids were just driving her crazy and she was actually seeing a psychiatrist. She said then she noticed *The Family Circus* in her newspaper, started reading it and realized that what I was drawing in the cartoon was exactly what her children were doing. She learned to laugh at them and enjoy what the kids were doing. She realized that her kids were fairly normal if the cartoonist is drawing this in his cartoon as being typical; her children weren't that abnormal at all. So she said that she was thanking me for it. Since she had been reading *The Family Circus*, she didn't have to see a psychiatrist any longer. It gave her a different aspect and she was enjoying the children more than feeling that she was put upon by them.

**ZL:** I kept thinking about this when I was reading about you, and wondering how your sense of humor had helped your family through tough times, difficult times, when all families have some struggles.

**BK:** I think it's not only my sense of humor, it's my wife's. She has a tremendous sense of humor. Being an Australian, she's very down to earth and very lovable. She likes people, people like her and there's nothing phony about her and most Australians. What you see is what you get. They are unfettered by all of the pomp and circumstances of society. Her humor and her philosophy, which is really the philosophy behind *The Family Circus*, the one of the warmth and the love and the camaraderie that is shown among the children and the parents, come from her personal life. So her humor along with mine, which is more of a commercialized version of it I think, has in our home life seen us through any times that appeared to be rough. Although I can honestly say looking back I can't think of any really rough time, and we just celebrated our 43rd wedding anniversary.

When the kids were small, we used to put them into the station wagon every summer. I would work ahead and get my work done for four to six weeks ahead and we would take a trip somewhere. One time we went





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up through Yellowstone, up into Banff, across Canada over to Vancouver Island and down the West Coast and stopped at motels along the way. We just had a ball. People these days say, "With five little kids in a station wagon, how could you do it?" To us it was just fun and the kids all got along and they still do. They all have a lot of fun, there's a lot of laughter.

They all come home at Christmas, here to our home. This house means so much to them. Every Christmas it's the same thing, "Mom and Dad, you'll never sell this house, will you? Cause if you do, give us the first chance to buy it." This is home to them. I think that's true of most kids that grow up in one place. There's nothing that will ever equal that place. It's where they learned how to be people and how to get along and so many very warm experiences that are involved in a home take place.

Of course in the cartoon, I not only draw Thel as the Mommy in the cartoon, she was the model for Mommy; I draw my own mother as the grandmother. The grandfather that I show in a spiritual way in heaven at times, and only in an aberration, was my dad who died in 1956, four years before I started *The Family Circus*. He is a very popular character now in the cartoon. Every time I do one of those Sunday pages, which show him coming down and helping Grandma or comforting her so she won't be lonely and the kids' association through prayer or a spiritual way with their grandfather, I get volumes of mail from people thanking me for giving a vehicle that they can use to show their children where a deceased member of the family has gone. It's a graphic way of dealing with the hereafter. It's an innovation to deal with the subject of death in the comic pages, which isn't the usual place for it. However, there's never been criticism of it because it's always done in a warm and loving way and not a morbid way at all.

At times, the cartoons that I do aren't really meant to be funny. They're meant to give the person a warm glow, a remembrance, a touch of nostalgia, a lump in the throat, a tear in the eye, a tug at the heart. Those emotions are every bit as important as laughter and I like to feel that a family and family life isn't made up of hundred percent of laughter. There's always that escape valve of laughter and see the funny side of it, but there are other emotions that are part of family life and all of this adds up to love for one another. I think the bottom line is if there is a philosophy behind *The Family Circus*, it's to show that a family that has respect for one another, that love one another, the parents for the children, the children for the parents and the children for one another, that is the happiest place in the world.

**ZL:** You seem to have a great understanding of and appreciation for the woman's role as a wife and mother. Do you think the fact that you worked at home contributed to that?

**BK:** I think so; I think that's true. The fact that I was at home and saw the family life, the kids and all the decisions that Thel and I made together; how they revolved around what Thel was doing, what she needed for the good of the entire family - whether it be how we would spend our money, balancing the budget, deciding on who sleeps in what room, where we were going to go, if we were going to eat out, if we were going to stay home. All of the little everyday decisions that need to be made are generally made by the



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mother. In our case, the mother being a loving, warm, person that she was, never any question in the kid's mind that this was right, this was exactly what we should be doing.

Although I don't make a conscious effort to show that, I think it comes through in the cartoon because I'm drawing what I see, I'm drawing typical family life. I have had people say, "Why do you show the children going to church? Why do you show them kneeling down to say their prayers?" I explain that that is part of family life and I'm drawing exactly what went on in our family. I'm not trying to preach at all. My main purpose in the cartoon is to entertain. I'm not trying to be an evangelist. That's secondary to the portrayal of a typical American family. I like to have my cartoons from 1960 up until today, I like to think of them as a chronicle of American family life and it is. Almost everything that people experience in the way of a family life from the time that children are born, the decisions that have to be made through schooling and through buying a new house or selling a house or buying a new car or the experiences of visiting grandparents or taking vacations together, all of these are put into a chronological sequence in the cartoon. I feel that if somebody a hundred years from now wanted to know what family life was like between 1960 and 1991, they could get a very clear idea just by reading *The Family Circus*.

**ZL:** Can you attribute any one thing to your great self-motivation? The fact that you can come out here, sit down all by yourself and create day after day just amazes me.

**BK:** I guess there's a certain egotism about it. I think part of being what people call "talented" is the extent that you have confidence. You figure that what you're doing is the right thing and I don't question. When I sit down and draw a cartoon, I don't try and second guess as to whether editors are going to like this or whether readers are going to like it. I feel that if it's something that says what I want it to say, I'll use it.

I've seen many cartoonists. I know most of the cartoonists in America. I was president of the National Cartoonists Society for two years and am very active with all the cartoonists. I've known many cartoonists who were selling cartoons to all of the magazines who tried to do a syndicated feature but failed because they didn't have the ability to decide what was good and what was not good. Being a good editor is every bit as important as being a good creator. The mixture of creativity from the writing standpoint with the art ability has to be a very carefully mixed two ingredients. It used to be that your artwork had to be fairly good in order to get a feature into the newspaper or to have readers look at it and put up with it or appreciate it. But today's cartoons contain artwork that's almost substandard at times, but the ideas and the character definition is so good that it makes up for the lack of good art. A good gag seldom is ruined by poor artwork and a poor idea is never enhanced by good artwork. So I think that there has to be a happy mixture of the two.

I know enough about drawing to express my ideas and my particular style. I've dovetailed tying the cuteness and the warmth and believability. I'm not too exaggerated in my art to where people, when I draw a portable radio, it looks like a portable radio and not just a box with a handle on it. I draw an automobile,



it has all of the lines of the newest cars and the wheels and the grill and the windshield and the wrap around stuff. It's not just a funny cartoon version of what an automobile is. And yet there are cartoonists who are drawing the real funny looking, supposedly poking fun at a given situation, whether it is a train, or a giraffe with an extra long neck or a horse with straight legs that bend at the knees like a human's does, that type of thing. There are licenses that can be taken because of being a cartoonist that you could never get away with if you were an illustrator.

People just figure that cartooning is something that, in fact, some people don't think it's a real career. They think you do it for fun. When we first moved here and I was sitting here drawing the cartoon, a plumber came to fix something and he said to my wife, "Mrs. Keane, I know your husband draws *The Family Circus* cartoon, but what's he do for a living?" You know, they don't really think you can make a living doing a cartoon. Of course, my stuff is almost to where I don't get criticism that some cartoonists get.

You know editorial cartoonists are always on the firing line because they're dealing with volatile subjects and subjects that are beyond; they're not just typical family things. In fact editorial cartoonists, I feel, don't draw cartoons for the fame or fortune, they do it out of a deep hatred for mankind, but they are good. I think that they are good. Really, I think the statements being made by editorial cartoonists today are so powerful; much more than they used to be. They used to just be symbolic, but today they really can knife people. They have to be careful because they carry a lot of weight.

**ZL:** They definitely make one think.

**BK:** They do, that's the real purpose, as is an editorial in a newspaper. You know you don't agree with it sometimes, but it riles you up to where you're thinking and talking about it or you're saying, "I'm glad somebody has finally said that."

**ZL:** Do you think raising a family has changed from the time you and Thel raised your family, to watching your children raise their children today?

**BK:** Well, I think the general rules and trappings and the situations in family life certainly have changed since we were first married and when our kids were small. Two working parents is the rule of thumb these days rather than having one parent at home. In fact, these days a lot of times it is the father who is at home and the mother who is out working, which was almost unheard of back in the days when we were first married. Marital situations have changed to the extent that single parents are not out of the ordinary these days. Divorces that result in mixed families, brothers and sisters, stepbrothers and stepsisters, broken homes, all of that has become acceptable in general society. So what I'm drawing is my experience and what would naturally be the ideal, if anybody could aspire to what the ideal could be, such as having a father go out to work and come home, the kids are all washed and bathed in their pajamas and Mommy's at home and has cooked dinner.



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The life-style of the American family has changed and even a comic such as *Blondie* where they recently have had *Blondie* go out to work, even though for 60 years she had been at home as a housewife and raised the family. To keep it up to date, Dean Young who is the son of Chic Young, the originator of *Blondie*, decided he would have *Blondie* go out to work. I have people who ask me, "Why not have Mommy go out to work?" I explain that a mother with five little kids, with Dolly and Billy at school and Jeffrey and P.J. at home, she has a full-time job at home taking care of them. She is not isolated as a stay-at-home because she takes part in community affairs, school affairs, the P.T.A. She will work for charity. She does all kinds of things at home, but fits it in among the normal raising of the family.

I don't think that the latchkey kid is ideal for the American family growing up. I think it's a necessity at times where both parents are working in order to make ends meet and it's really just economics. Economically you need to have two incomes today in order to raise a family. I also think that the subject matter that I touch on in the cartoons reflects the times. Years ago I couldn't do cartoons about . . . I would never mention the word sex in a cartoon, but it can be mentioned today. I would never show a bathroom scene where you saw a toilet, years ago when I began the cartoon in 1960, editors wouldn't run it in the newspaper. But today it's perfectly acceptable and the children are so much more aware of all facets of life that a cartoon, in order to keep its finger on the pulse, has to keep up with it. I very carefully keep it under the umbrella of the watchful eye of a mother at home with the kids, although I never hint that she is a subservient housewife. She really runs the family and I try carefully not to have Daddy appear as an oaf or as a bumbling idiot as in some cartoons. I try to make him a loving and devoted father and husband and they all have a relationship that I don't intend changing just because I'm trying to make it look like they are part of today's world. They are part of today's world and there are families like this and there are many families that would like to be like that. I think therein lies a lot of the popularity of the feature. Either it's a role model for people who would like their families to be like that or they look back on times when they were like that, especially grandparents and the older people who see themselves as when they were raising their children in that particular role.

I get a lot of mail from senior citizens. Of course, they have a little more time to write than the young mother or the young father. Most of the mail, in fact all of it, is so complementary it gets slightly embarrassing for me to read through the mail. A person will say "I've never sent a fan letter before in my life, but I wanted to let you know what *The Family Circus* has meant to me. I just had my 93rd birthday." They're sitting in a retirement home somewhere writing just to tell me. This isn't an unusual thing, it's commonplace and all that mail that comes in has become such a large part of my workday.

If I only did the newspaper stuff, the drawing of the daily and Sunday cartoon, I would only work two days a week really. It's doing all the other stuff, answering the mail and doing all the charity things that I'm asked to do for posters, special drawings, doing the extracurricular things, such as the books and calendars, advertising, the number of things that *The Family Circus* is involved in, it takes the remainder





of the week. I'm usually here seven days a week at some point drawing, unless somebody calls and asks to play tennis, then the work has to go.

**ZL:** That's your avocation?

**BK:** I like to think of it as my vocation and this other stuff I do at the drawing board as my avocation.

**ZL:** I think I read where you built a tennis court.

**BK:** Yes. One of the funny things, these little *The Family Circus* books that are out, the paperback books, on the back of the cover they always have a photo of me and a little biography. One of the book's biographies's said that the Keanes live their happy life by a tennis court near Phoenix, Arizona. There was a lady in Tokyo, a little Japanese lady, who was a big fan and she wrote me a fan letter. She addressed it to "Mr. Bill Keane, by a tennis court near Phoenix, Arizona" and she mailed it and it was delivered. The post office here has done a tremendous job. Where I would be without them? I don't know, because all these years they have been my connection with the world.

When I mail my stuff to the syndicate in New York City and incidentally the syndicate that I started with, the Register and Tribune syndicate changed its name to Kohl's Syndicate at one point in the early 80s. Then in 1986, King Features Syndicate, the biggest syndicate in America, wanted to get *The Family Circus* as part of their stable, but I was tied up under contract with the Register and Tribute Syndicate or Kohl's as it was known, so they bought the syndicate. King Features, which is the Hertz Corporation, bought Kohl's Syndicate in order to get *The Family Circus* and then I became part of King Features, although I still carry the Kohl's Syndicate for legal reasons. We renegotiated a contract in 1988 with King Features where I obtained the ownership of my comic. Most cartoonists do not own the cartoon that they draw. King Features still owns *Blondie* and they own *Hagar the Harvel* and *Beatle Bailey* and *Prince Valiant* and as many cartoons as you can name. They're all owned by King Features and they've never ever given ownership, but Thel negotiated my contract and insisted that I was going to get ownership which gives me full control of the feature.

Upon my death, my family would be able to decide what will happen with the feature. My son Jeff, right now is 33, and he's my assistant on the cartoon. He lives in Laguna Niguel, California and we work together through the telephone, fax and Federal Express. He puts together the books and calendars and does some of the penciling on the dailies. That's really a kick to see your kids come along and be able to inherit what you've built. I've spent a lifetime building a precious commodity and I would just hate, as with other cartoonists when they die or retire, the syndicate owns the feature and then they hire somebody to draw it and there's no control and the income ceases for the heirs or the family.

My son Glenn, who is now 37 and was really the model for Billy, used to draw like a seven year old. I tried



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to draw like he drew when he was seven years old when I had Billy fill in for me on Fathers' Day and different occasions. Glenny's now an animator for Walt Disney Productions, in fact he's their top animator. He created the character of *The Little Mermaid* for them and he's just done the beast for *Beauty and the Beast*, which is coming out on the 22nd of November this year. He's doing a tremendous job and is a very very talented young directing animator. He has a number of guys working under him. We're very proud of what he's done. In fact all of the kids have migrated to California. Their careers have taken them there. They're all doing real well in their chosen careers. One's a musician, one's a writer, our daughter Gail had a plant and flower shop in Sacramento called Bloomingales, which she has run and she handles a lot of the mail for me. She'll be down here tomorrow in fact.

She comes down every couple weeks and handles all the filing and takes care of answering a lot of the requests we have for originals for charities, which has gotten to be a tremendous thing. If we gave out an original every time we're asked for one for charities and good causes, there wouldn't be any originals left at all. Across the country, there are all kinds of fund raisers and they're all worthwhile, but Thel reads the mail, screens it. I only get dumped on my desk the ones that I need to answer personally and I do try to answer almost all of the mail myself. Jeff will take care of some of the mail from the school kids that ask questions and he can answer them for me. We have a little form drawing that I have of the family saying hi to whomever, might write in the names. I think if people who are fans take the time to write, I feel it's only right that I answer them personally.

**ZL:** When you first came to Phoenix, it was a much smaller city.

**BK:** Yes, it was.

**ZL:** With evap air cooling as the norm. I don't think there was much air conditioning in automobiles in those days.

**BK:** Well, yes cause it was 1958 and air conditioning was in all of the newer homes. This home when it was built had air conditioning. Most of the cars had air conditioning. After World War II, that's when air conditioning really made the metropolitan Phoenix area what it is, because without it you couldn't have year-round industry and tourism and everything else that you have here. We love Arizona, we've seen it grow. We haven't even yet seen all of it, but when the kids were small we took trips to the Grand Canyon. I did a series of vacation cartoons showing the family visiting the Grand Canyon which was fun to do. I donated the original artwork to the museum up there at the Grand Canyon. I did for *Arizona Highways* a map called *Bill Keane's Arizona*, and I just did a new one that they have made into a jigsaw puzzle. It's a road map of Arizona with little cartoons all around for *Arizona Highways*. I feel that's a bit of a way of paying them back for the pictures and magazines that I saw as a young newspaper artist in Philadelphia at the time I was looking for a place to move to. It influenced me a lot.



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**ZL:** In 1967, you and five other cartoonists made a USO tour to Vietnam. Can you talk about that experience?

**BK:** The Defense Department asked the National Cartoonists Society if they would have some cartoonists who would volunteer to go over to Vietnam to entertain the troops and I was one of six that volunteered. We flew down to Saigon and then they broke us up into two groups of three and then we had an escort officer with us. They would fly us by helicopter into the areas that were isolated, where there would just be the troops, the Vietnamese troops with some advisory U.S. troops. They were the ones that never received any entertainment at all. Bob Hope would go over, Martha Raye, different shows would go over, but they would fly into the big bases, set up their bands, do the show and move on. These little groups that were out in the isolated areas would never get anything, but the helicopter could chopper us in, drop us down and we would spend the night there. We would go to the mess hall, put on a little show and draw cartoons and caricatures; visit the hospitals and do caricature drawings of the soldiers that were in the beds. It was a very eye-opening experience. We spent 24 days traveling throughout every base in Vietnam from Da Nang to Saigon and below. We went to Thailand and Bangkok and did some shows for the Air Force out of there.

I think it did a lot of good especially in the hospitals where these guys were lying in the bed there with one arm off and wondering, "Why are we doing this? Everybody's forgotten about us." And then up alongside the bed comes a cartoonist who says, "Hi, I'm Bill Keane, I draw *The Family Circus* and I just stopped to say hello." I would make a little drawing for them and give it to them. It meant a lot. There was one place, an intensive care ward - these were all field hospitals that were set up in the combat zones over there - and we went in and the soldiers were all in various beds and various stages of living and dying. There was a soldier I saw, he was just absolutely white, pale and he had tubes coming out of his mouth and nose and all over and you could see under the sheets that one leg was off. He was obviously unconscious, so I passed by his bed and went down a couple of beds. I was starting to draw and the colonel in charge of the hospital unit came to me and he said, "Why did you pass him by?" I said, "Well, I didn't want to disturb him." He said, "Would you go back and make a drawing? I think it might do some good." So I went back and I sat there and started talking to him as I made a drawing. I made this drawing of him lying in the bed with tubes coming out all over the place, sort of made a funny thing. I drew Billy looking over the bed saying - I got his name off of the chart there - and Billy's saying, "Hi Larry." I handed it to him and put it in his hand and this guy that had been lying there, I thought unconscious, sort of half-opened his eyes and he lifted his head up and looked at the drawing and he sort of smiled, just this big grin came over his face and he shook his head and he laid back down on the pillow. The colonel grabbed me and he says, "That's the first sign of emotion we've seen out of him. I think he's gonna make it."

You know you walk away and you think well here are these . . . All people in America wondering what's going on, but here we were down there doing something hands on. There were times that I was lying there at night trying to go to sleep and the mortar fire was landing around and you wonder, "What am I doing



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here? I spent three years in World War II, I have five kids at home,” but I never regretted for a minute the time that I spent. I was so glad to get back home and the cartoonists who were with me were all of the same line. You know we just felt it was something that . . . I think that for the most part, cartoonists, like entertainers, are happy to do anything that they can when there's a national emergency. It's sharing the talent with the people.

**ZL:** You've had a real impact on the community. Mayor John Driggs presented you with the Outstanding Phoenician Award in 1972 and the Elks Lodge 335 presented you a Seventh Annual Community Service Award in 1962.

**BK:** Yeah, I remember that, they were fun. Those things back in those days were really a novelty to be recognized for anything like that and I have, I've tried to contribute anything I can to the community. I continue to do special drawings and posters, this one right there for the Herberger Theatre that's coming out the 24th of this month. They asked me to do a poster which I did and there are all of these community services which I can contribute to from my drawing board and I don't mind doing them if I can fit them in. I can't do everything, but I've done a poster every year for the Catholic Diocese, the Bishop's Charity and Development Appeal. I do a poster that's sent around to all of the churches. Those have raised millions of dollars that are all kept within Arizona for nonsectarian charity which is where it's needed. I like to feel that *The Family Circus* is there. It fits the image perfectly. I do these posters for grammar schools that really promote self-esteem among kids. They're called spirit posters and every two weeks there's a new one in grammar schools. They have that frame that they can put them into and it helps kids. It gets a message across and it's really an extension of my daily *The Family Circus* cartoons because there I can put a message. Instead of just having Dolly saying, "I'll recite a poem I learned at school, Grandma; you sit down and clap," which would be a gag in the newspaper, I can add to it. You know, "Be proud of what you've learned," as a message for the kids.

**ZL:** I like this other one on self-esteem.

**BK:** Yeah, where Billy's coming in all tattered and torn and he's saying, "We were playing follow the leader" which is a typical *The Family Circus* gag; but then underneath there's a message says, "Never do things just because everybody's doing them." And I cover subjects such as stay away from drugs and alcohol and learn to get along with everybody and we're all made up of different colors; all of the messages you would like kids to remember and when they can see it as part of *The Family Circus* it gives them something else to identify with.

**ZL:** In 1983, you won the National Cartoonists Society Reuben Award, Cartoonist of the Year. Was that a special award for you?

**BK:** Oh yeah, that's only given out to one cartoonist each year and all the cartoonists in America vote on it.





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It's a special honor because the first one to receive that was Milton Caniff 40 some years ago for *Terry and the Pirates*. People like Walt Disney and Walt Kelly that did *Pogo*, Alex Raymond that created *Flash Gordon*, the man that did *Gasoline Alley*, Dick Moores. There were people that had done editorial cartoons and I was voted as the Cartoonist of the Year and received the statue. It's a Reuben Award named after Rube Goldberg. It's our version of the Oscar or the Emmy and it's very coveted and really nice to have.

**ZL:** I think I've about covered all the questions I had for you.

**BK:** You've covered most of my career that's of any interest anyway. From the standpoint of being an Arizonan, I can't think of a better place to work. I promote the state anytime that I can. Of those 14 million books in print, almost all of them mention that I live in Paradise Valley, Arizona. I think the relaxed atmosphere and the working conditions that I've had, of course I have it ideally because I work here, enjoy the state, enjoy the weather year round and mail my stuff into all of the blizzard ridden places and it's ideal for me. It's been a wonderful place to raise our family. I think Arizona is a one-of-a-kind.

**ZL:** Thank you very much for doing this interview for the Historical Society and spending this time today.

**BK:** All right, Zona. I always think anytime you're talking to a cartoonist, you expect it to be the Hysterical Society, but I'm happy to do it.

