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What's Up, Doc? Ralph Heimdahl, Central Minnesota, and Bugs Bunny

Willmar, Minnesota, native and 1930 St. Cloud State graduate Ralph Heimdahl spent more than 30 years drawing Bugs Bunny for newspaper comic strips. From 1947 through 1978, the Minnesota native drew the rascally rabbit and illustrated countless children's and comic books. He also wrote and illustrated original comic strips.

Bugs Bunny's connection to Central Minnesota was cemented in late 2019 when Heimdahl's youngest daughter, Martha, donated more than 5,000 of his drawings to the St. Cloud State University Archives. The Ralph Heimdahl Papers contain mostly the drafts or "under drawings" of the Bugs Bunny Sunday and daily comic strip. This collection is accessible in University Archives for use and study.

Born on March 22, 1909, in Willmar, Ralph Heimdahl attended the St. Cloud State Teachers College from the fall of 1928 until graduating in 1930. He was very active in campus life, especially athletics. He played football, basketball, and ran track. After graduation, Heimdahl went on to fulfill his pledge to teach in Minnesota public schools for two years in Milona, Minnesota, and the Faribault School for the Deaf. He enjoyed teaching and art.

In 1937, Heimdahl entered a Disney drawing competition and was offered a spot in their animation school. Upon completing animation school, he was hired as an animator at Disney and moved to southern California. There he worked on full-length animated feature films such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Fantasia*, *Pinocchio*, *Dumbo*, and *Bambi*. Heimdahl also taught animation to new hires. During the 1941 Disney labor strike, Heimdahl resigned his position at Disney. He and his growing family left for Vermont where he worked as a mechanical engineer in Elmira, New York. The lure of southern California was strong and the Heimdahl family moved back to the Los Angeles area in the mid-1940s.

In 1946, Heimdahl was hired by Western Publishing to draw comic books. He soon was tapped to draw the Sunday Bugs Bunny newspaper comic strip in late 1947 and he was the inaugural artist for the daily Bugs Bunny strip that began in late 1948. Heimdahl collaborated with writer Al Stoffel during the entire he worked on Bugs Bunny. Heimdahl's work at one point appeared in 450 national newspapers as well as internationally. In the fall of 1978, Heimdahl retired from the comic strip but continued to draw comic book covers and create other art as well. He passed away on November 12, 1981, and was survived by his wife Esther (who he met while they both worked at Disney) and daughters LaVerne, Linda, and Martha.

In late 2019, two large boxes of material arrived at the St. Cloud State University Archives. It was the culmination of years of hard work and negotiation between SCSU and the family to gift Heimdahl's papers to the university. While visiting with Martha and her husband Bill in their home in California earlier that year, I confirmed that this material was right for St. Cloud State to preserve and make accessible. I soon had a plan in place to do that.

The crown jewel of the Heimdahl Papers are more than 5,000 draft drawings of the Sunday and daily Bugs Bunny comic strips. Drawn with pencil on onion skin paper, the underdrawings were shown to writer Al Stoffel and adjustments were made if needed. Heimdahl drew a week's worth

of strips, then met with Stoffel. If they both approved after any needed revisions, Heimdahl created the final ink version from the underdrawing. The finished ink drawing was given to Western Publishing, who then compiled their comic strips in a large booklet and sent that to newspapers who subscribed to the strip. At some point, the final ink drawings were returned to Heimdahl, who often generously gave them away to friends and fans.

In the daily and Sunday strips, Bugs was often shown trying to make a buck by selling items or providing services to his friends Porky Pig, Petunia, and Elmer Fudd. Some of Bugs' businesses were: "Bugsy's Toupees," "Bugsy's News Stand," "Bugsy's Beanery," "Bugsy's Used but not Abused Furniture," "Bugsy's Confidential Loan," and "Bugsy's Watch Repair." Sylvester was typically a foil to Bugs, trying to mooch money or a free meal as often as he could. Other frequent gags include Bugs competing with Petunia for time on the pay phone, babysitting Porky's nephew Cicero, or working for Mr. Schnoogle and Schnoogle's various businesses.

To make it easier to organize the drawing as well be easier to put into context, University Archives' students were tasked to date the undated strips – and were overwhelmingly successful. We discovered that the Sunday drawings dated from late 1947 to 1978 while the daily strips mostly dated from 1966 to 1978. The drafts are a fun insight into that creative process and interesting to compare them to the few final ink drawings that are in University Archives.

The Ralph Heimdahl Papers include drafts of several Bugs Bunny children's books: *Bugs Bunny Keeps a Promise*, *Bugs Bunny's Space Carrot*, and *Bugs Bunny's Birthday*. Again, these show the creative process, including pages that were not part of the final printed books. To help demonstrate that creativity, University Archives has the printed books for patrons to compare and contrast against the draft drawings.

Other material in the Heimdahl Papers include sketches of Looney Tunes characters, draft comic book covers, and proposed ideas written and drawn by Heimdahl, including Yippy the Yukon Pilot, Herky the Horse, and Mr. Puffin. There are examples of the Heimdahl-penned strip in the late 1940s featuring characters Minnie Soo and Little HaHa.

University Archives conducted an oral history with daughter Martha Heimdahl in March 2022 to help provide additional context to the papers. The oral history can be found at https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/scsu_oh/1/

Thanks to a financial donation to University Archives by the Heimdahl family, the materials were arranged and described quickly, a project completed during the COVID pandemic. It enabled a graduate student to be hired to do the work under my supervision. By the end of the summer of 2020, the materials were processed and ready to be used. The index and finding aid for the Ralph Heimdahl Papers at the St. Cloud State University Archives can be found at: <https://scsu.mn/3TGG012>

The materials are always available for viewing at the St. Cloud State University Archives during office hours, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. University Archives is open during the academic year but often closed during breaks and the summer. Appointments are encouraged.

Please contact University Archives via email at archives@stcloudstate.edu or by telephone at 320-308-4753.