

# Remember Popeye the Sailor Man?

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club



## *Popeye: An Introduction*

Popeye and Olive Oyl both originated in the comic strip *Thimble Theatre*—but Olive Oyl was the main character for ten years before the January 1929 introduction of Popeye. The subsequent renaming of the strip to *Popeye* reflected the popularity of the new main character and became one of King Features' most popular assets during the 1930s. The only thing Popeye loves more than spinach and the sea is his flighty, flirty girlfriend, Olive Oyl.

**Elzie Crisler Segar** (born in Chester, Illinois, USA) created the fictional cartoon character *Popeye the Sailor Man*. Popeye first appeared in the daily **King Features** comic strip *Thimble Theatre*. Popeye also appeared in theatrical and television animated cartoons.<sup>1</sup>

Segar died in 1938, and after his death, *Thimble Theatre* was continued by several writers and artists, most notably Segar's assistant **Bud Sagendorf**. The strip continued to appear in first-run instalments in its Sunday edition, written and drawn by **Hy Eisman**. The daily strips are reprints of old Sagendorf stories.

In 1933, **Max Fleischer** adapted the *Thimble Theatre* characters into a series of *Popeye the Sailor* theatrical cartoon shorts for **Paramount Pictures**. These cartoons proved to be among the most popular of the 1930s, and Fleischer—and later Paramount's **Famous Studios**—continued production through 1957. These cartoon shorts are now owned by **Turner Entertainment** and distributed by its sister company **Warner Bros**.

Over the years, Popeye has also appeared in comic books, television cartoons, video games, hundreds of advertisements, peripheral products ranging from spinach to **candy cigarettes**, and the **1980 live-action film** directed by **Robert Altman** and starring **Robin Williams** as Popeye.

**Charles M. Schulz** said, "*I think Popeye was a perfect comic strip, consistent in drawing and humor*". In 2002, *TV Guide* ranked Popeye number 20 on its *50 Greatest Cartoon Characters of All Time* list.



Picture Credit: "Popeye" by JeepersMedia is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)

<sup>1</sup> Source for this section: Wikipedia, [HERE](#).

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## *The Popeye Story*

Popeye's story and characterisation vary depending on the medium in which he appeared. Originally, Popeye got "luck" from rubbing the head of the Whiffle Hen; by 1932, this had changed to Popeye gaining "strength" from eating spinach. **Swee'Pea** is Popeye's ward in the comic strips, but he is often depicted as belonging to **Olive Oyl** in cartoons.

There is no absolute sense of continuity in the stories, although specific plots and presentation elements remain mostly constant, including purposeful contradictions in Popeye's capabilities. Popeye seems bereft of manners and uneducated, yet he often comes up with solutions to problems that seem impossible to the police or the scientific community. He has displayed **Sherlock Holmes**-like investigative prowess, scientific ingenuity, and successful diplomatic arguments. In the animated cartoons, Popeye's pipe also proves to be highly versatile. Among other things, it has served as a cutting torch, jet engine, propeller, periscope, musical instrument, and a whistle with which he produces his trademark toot. He also eats spinach through his pipe, sometimes sucking in the can along with the contents. Since the 1970s, Popeye is seldom depicted using his pipe to smoke tobacco.

## *Plot Elements and Characters*

Popeye's exploits are also enhanced by a few recurring plot elements. One is the love triangle among Popeye, Olive, and **Bluto**, and Bluto's endless machinations to claim Olive as his girlfriend at Popeye's expense. Another is Popeye's near-saintly perseverance in overcoming any obstacle to please Olive, who often (if temporarily) renounces Popeye for Bluto.

Popeye first appeared in the strip on 17<sup>th</sup> January 1929, albeit as a minor character. He was initially hired by Castor Oyl and Ham to crew a ship for a voyage to Dice Island, the location of a casino owned by the crooked gambler Fadewell. Castor intended to break the bank at the casino using the unbeatable good luck conferred by stroking the hairs on the head of Bernice the Whiffle Hen. Weeks later, on the trip back, Popeye was shot many times by Jack Snork, a stooge of Fadewell's, but survived by rubbing Bernice's head. After the adventure, Popeye left the strip, but after an outcry from readers, he was quickly brought back.

The Popeye character became so popular that he was given a more prominent role, and the strip was taken up by many more newspapers as a result. Initial strips presented Olive as being less than impressed with Popeye, but she eventually she left Hamgravy to become Popeye's girlfriend, while Hamgravy left the strip as a regular. Over the years, however, she has often displayed a fickle attitude towards the sailor. Castor Oyl continued to come up with **get-rich-quick schemes** and enlisted Popeye in his misadventures. Eventually, he settled down as a **detective** and later bought a **ranch** out west. Castor's appearances became sparser over time.

In 1933, Popeye received a foundling baby in the mail whom he adopted and named **Swee'Pea**. Other regular characters in the strip were **J. Wellington Wimpy**, a soft-spoken and cowardly **hamburger**-loving moocher who would "gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today"; **George W. Geezil**, a local **cobbler** who spoke in a heavily affected accent and habitually attempted to murder or wish death upon Wimpy; and **Eugene the Jeep**, a yellow, vaguely doglike animal from Africa with **magical** powers. In addition, the strip featured the **Sea Hag**, a terrible **pirate** and the last **witch** on Earth; **Alice the Goon**, a monstrous creature who entered the comic strip as the Sea Hag's henchwoman and continued as Swee'Pea's **babysitter**; and Toar, a caveman.

## *Fun Facts*<sup>2</sup>

Popeye is known as:

- Iron Arm in Italy
- Karl Alfred in Sweden, and
- Skipper Skraek or "Terror of the Sea" in Denmark.

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://popeye.com/timeline/>

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Spinach Capital of the World, Crystal City, Texas, erected a statue in March 1937 to honour E.C. Segar and Popeye for their influence on America's spinach-eating habits, making Popeye one of the first cartoon characters ever immortalised in public sculpture.

In 1995, The US Postal Service featured Popeye in its *American Comic Classics* collection of postage stamps issued to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the American comic strip.

The 1980 live-action film based on *Popeye* was only pushed into production after Paramount Pictures lost a bidding war for the rights to a live-action movie based on the Little Orphan Annie comic strip.<sup>3</sup>

In 2004, the Empire State Building was lit up in spinach green to honour Popeye's 75th birthday.<sup>4</sup>

## *The Polish Roots of Popeye*

Most people know Popeye as a tough, spinach-eating sailor, a cartoon character created by the American cartoonist E. C. Segar. The cartoonist created the Thimble Theatre comic strip in New York's *Evening Journal*. Popeye is remembered as a pugnacious, wisecracking cartoon sailor who possesses superhuman strength after ingesting an always-handy can of spinach. But do you know who the real-life inspiration behind the strong sailor was?<sup>5</sup>

Popeye was a childhood hero to millions and has made a name for himself everywhere he appeared.

**Encyclopedia Britannica** defines the fictitious sailor for us:

*"Popeye is a scrappy little seaman with bulging forearms, a squinty eye, and a screwed-up face, punctuated with an ever-present pipe in his mouth. He is always ready for a fight instead of a reasonable discussion, has a gravelly voice, and is constantly mumbling under his breath. His credo is 'I yam what I yam, and that's all what I yam.' His girlfriend is the gangly, uncoordinated Olive Oyl, for whose attention Popeye vies constantly with Bluto, his bearded, hulking rival."*

According to Culture/PL, [HERE](#), many claim the fictitious pipe-smoking, spinach-eating sailor was based on a real-life person, one of the citizens of E.C. Segar's hometown. The man in question is believed to have been Frank 'Rocky' Fiegel, who was born in Poland.

Fiegel, a bartender and general labourer around Chester, Illinois, seldom had steady work and was often seen loafing around the town's saloons. He lived with his mother until she died, then lived in the house alone. Frank Fiegel was a local brawler, famous for his fist-fighting skills, and it's because of that we see a striking resemblance to the cartoon character Popeye.

## *How did the name Popeye come about?*

For most of Fiegel's life, he worked as a bartender and not a sailor, although he always talked about wanting to sail around the world. He was bold, had a strong chin, thick arms, and smoked like a chimney. He always wore a striped sailor's t-shirt, his cap and would never leave his home without his smoking pipe in his mouth.

The poor chap had a natural deformation of his face was that he had one eye larger than the other and squinted - which is how he got the nickname "Pop-Eye".<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Source: Mental Floss, [HERE](#).

<sup>4</sup> Source: Daily Express, [HERE](#).

<sup>5</sup> Source for the above, Culture.PL, [HERE](#).

<sup>6</sup> Source: historyofyesterday.com, [HERE](#).

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## *Not Forgetting Olive Oyl*



Picture Credit: "Olive Oyl" by Mabacam is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

We must not forget about Olive Oyl. We know that Popeye had a soft spot for her and often won her attention away from his rival Bluto.

Olive Oyl is the cartoon character created by Popeye's creator E. C. Segar in 1919 for his comic strip *Thimble Theatre*, although Popeye burst on the scene ten years after Olive's appearance. The strip was later renamed *Popeye* after the sailor character who became the most popular cast member.

In the strip as written by Segar, Olive was something of a coy **flapper** whose tall and skinny build lent itself well to the fashions of the time; her long black hair was usually rolled in a neat bun, like her mother's. Olive is the youngest sibling of Castor Oyl and Crude Oyl. She was the more-or-less fiancée of **Harold Hamgravy** (Ham), a "lounge lizard" or slacker type who did as little work as possible and was always borrowing money.

Ham's attraction to other women—particularly if they were rich—naturally and frequently incensed Olive, and she once succumbed to a fit of "lunaphobia" (a kind of angry madness) over one of his flings. (When she recovered, she continued to pretend to have the disorder to win him back.)

Olive was not immune to flattery from other men, but remained committed to Ham until Popeye's appearance. Olive and Popeye hated each other when they first met (her first words to him were "Take your hooks offa me or I'll lay ya in a scupper"); they fought bitterly—and hilariously—for weeks until finally realising that they had romantic feelings for each other.

A constant theme in films and later television cartoons has Olive Oyl as Popeye's girlfriend. However, she was often highly fickle, depending on who could woo her the best or had the flashier possessions. She was prone to become angry with Popeye over seemingly minor issues. She constantly gets kidnapped by **Bluto** (aka Brutus), who is Popeye's arch-rival for her affections; when she gets angry with Popeye for whatever goes wrong, it's usually as a result of Bluto's trickery, but Popeye always rescues her and wins back her affection in the process.

In the cartoons, Olive helps take care of a baby named **Swee'Pea** or she usually asks Popeye to take care of him if she's too busy; it's unknown if Swee'Pea is Olive Oyl's biological or adopted son. In the comics, Swee'Pea is a founding under Popeye's care. Later sources (mostly in the cartoon series) say that Swee'Pea is Olive Oyl's cousin or nephew that she has to take care of from time to time.

Like Popeye, there are times where Olive gains superhuman strength from eating **spinach**.

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## Videos Online

- Evolution of POPEYE THE SAILOR - 90 Years Explained | Cartoon Evolution, [HERE](#).
- The Origins of Popeye, [HERE](#).
- Popeye The Sailor Man Classic Collection HD, [HERE](#).
- Popeye, The Movie, [HERE](#).
- Classic Popeye: Popeye's Junior Headache, [HERE](#).



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## Sources and Further Reading

- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popeye>
- [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olive\\_Oyl](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olive_Oyl)
- <https://popeye.com/timeline/>
- <https://popeye.fandom.com/wiki/Popeye>
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- <https://historyofyesterday.com/popeye-the-sailor-man-was-inspired-by-real-people-9c4d60183622?gi=2972e567494c>
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