

Contemporary Collectibles: Collectors rediscover Uncle Wiggily

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

With Easter approaching, our thoughts naturally turn to bunnies, a species that has proliferated throughout children's literature like - well - rabbits. From Peter Rabbit to Benjamin Bunny to the Velveteen Rabbit and the Runaway Bunny, most adults have a favorite character from the Leporidae world.

One usually left out of this sentimental appreciation, however, is Uncle Wiggily, once a popular figure in books, games and newspaper comics, called by expert and author Ted Hake possibly "the most underrated character in comic character history today."

A prime reason for this is the fact that Uncle Wiggily Longears was not a cuddly little cotton-tailed bunny, but a mature gentleman rabbit. The character came into being when Edward M Scudder, owner and publisher of the Newark Evening News, approached Howard R. Garis to write some bedtime stories for his newspaper. Garis complied by creating a running column of tales about Uncle Wiggily and his animal friends, the first of which appeared on Jan. 30, 1910, and was soon syndicated to other papers as well.

Illustrations were added for a Sunday page that ran from 1919 through the '20s, followed by a daily comic strip that appeared in the mid-1920s.

Uncle Wiggily was an elegantly attired, elderly hare who wore a tailcoat and top hat and used a wooden crutch because he suffered from rheumatism. His residence was a hollow tree bungalow in Animal Land, where he was surrounded by such companions as Nurse Jane Fuzzy Wuzzy, his caring muskrat housekeeper, and friends like Uncle Butter, Billie Bushytail, Sammie and Suzie Littletail, Grandpa Goosey Gander and Mrs. Wibblewobble.

Comical names - even more so for villains - were a major element of these stories: Woozie Woolf, the Skillery Skallery Alligator, the Skuddlemagoon, Old Bazumbers, the Boozap, the Pipsiewak and the Skeezecks. Many of the tales dealt with the pleasures of country life of the period - picnics, fishing, days at the beach, corn and marshmallow roasts, sleigh rides and hayrides, quilting bees, cider making and taffy pulls. Into these idyllic scenes would enter some troublemakers who were particularly after the "souse" in the rabbit's ears - a term that was never quite defined.

Howard Garis had a career that extended beyond his Wiggily activities. He was one of the many pseudonymous authors churning out boys and girls adventure books for the Stratemeyer Syndicate. He wrote the first 35 Tom Swift stories (as Victor Appleton), volumes of the Motor Boys series (as Clarence Young), Camp Fire Girls books (as Marion Davidson), Baseball Joe books (as Lester Chadwick) and, under the name of Laura Lee Hope, a large number of Bobbsey Twins adventures. In addition, he made numerous radio appearances over WJZ in Newark, N.J., reading his stories on the air.

For anyone interested in exploring the fascinating world of Uncle Wiggily, there's a mountain of early memorabilia out there, dating back to the teens. In addition to the original syndicated newspaper stories and daily comic strips, and appearances in Dell's "Animal Comics" starting in 1942 (and sometimes drawn by Walt "Pogo" Kelly), there are Big Little Books and dozens of other story books, with titles like "Uncle Wiggily's Apple Roast," "Uncle Wiggily and the Pirates," "Uncle Wiggily's Picnic" and "Uncle Wiggily's June Bug Friends." In the 1920s, there were several pieces of china marketed by Sebring Pottery Co, including mugs, plates and a rare silverplate-trimmed bowl now worth about \$425 in excellent condition.

Among other Uncle Wiggily playthings were a 1919 Put a Hat on Uncle Wiggily party game kit from Milton Bradley, a very desirable boxed game also by Milton Bradley, a Hollow Stump Bungalow pressed cardboard toy with figures and a Hollow Stump Club cello button, a 1943 stuffed doll by Georgine Averill and numerous picture puzzles.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

Â© Copley News Service

Contemporary Collectibles: Collectors rediscover Uncle Wiggily by Linda_Rosenkrantz