Aging Lifestyles: 'Well, blow me down' - Popeye at 80

by Joe_Volz

Popeye, that diminutive, but aggressive, spinach-swilling comic character of our salad days is about to turn 80.

But he is far from retired.

A Popeye DVD is going to be released for the first time this month. So, grandma and grandpa, you may want to buy some of those original Popeye short films, dating back to 1933, being peddled by Warner Home Video.

And the Official Popeye Fan Club, based in Chester, Ill., the hometown of the strip's originator, the late Elize Crisler Segar, is holding a Popeye celebration Sept. 7-9, including a live radio broadcast, using an original script. There is also an unofficial Popeye page, where fans can write their own views on an electronic message board.

An Illinois man wrote that he grew up watching Popeye "and now my grandkids are watching him, too. As soon as I find the right picture, I am going to have Popeye tattooed on my left outside calf muscle." Popeye loved tattoos.

By anybody's standards, Popeye, even if he was not real, was unique. He was 5 foot 6 and weighed 156 but when he downed a can of spinach, he could whip anybody. His chest would expand from 30 inches to 60 inches.

How tough was Popeye?

He wrote, in a letter to his fans, in 1936, "I been shot 120 times and I ain't dead yet. When a bullet does go through me hide, it don't bother me none excepting I has to cork up the hole on account of I don't like drafts blowing through me."

He took on all comers, defeating them with his "Twisker Sock" (OK) punch. His arm would spin with the speed of a bullet. Men like 370-pound Brutus, or Bolo, Jabbo or the infamous Jack the Zipper were all demolished.

Popeye was a heroic salesman, too. In the mid-1930s, the spinach business claimed that U.S. consumption of the stuff had increased 33 percent largely because of Popeye. Kids who had abhorred spinach were gobbling it up. One distraught mother complained to Segar that her child wouldn't eat anything but spinach. Could Popeye tell the child that he could consume other foods, too? One of the things that endeared Popeye to the kids was his rough and irreverent behavior. Popeye's belligerence landed him in trouble with the newspaper giant, William Randolph Hearst, who owned Popeye's comic strip syndicate, King Features. The bombastic Hearst commanded Segar, a quiet, introverted cartoonist, to "make Popeye respectable."

Segar at first balked.

"There's nothing funny about a sissy sailor," he said. But Bud Sagendorf, Segar's assistant who later penned the strip, said, "Popeye's language was softened and his random smacking with a cause was modified. He almost became a gentleman."

Said Popeye: "I yam now a gentlemans."

Popeye was enamored of an older woman, Olive Oyl, now 90. She was a pickle-nosed beanpole, almost 6 feet tall. But in the years before Popeye became a would-be gentleman, he certainly was a world-class ruffian. When he saw Olive swooning over a pulp novel, called "Lumberjack Love," he decided that if Olive really wanted some rough love he would provide. He broke a couple of her ribs.

By the 1980s, Popeye was a health nut. A perennial pipe smoker, he gave up tobacco, instead filling up his pipe with, you guessed it, spinach.

A real life local character back in Chester was apparently the inspiration for Popeye. Sagendorf said his name was Frank "Rocky" Feigle, a wiry man who worked as a cleanup man at the local saloon. Rocky was famous for never losing a fight.

LINKS

Sailor News, www.popeye.com Official Popeye Fan Club, www.popeyethesailor.com Unofficial Popeye Page, www.popeye-n-olive.com .

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