Russell Myers

Oklahoma cartoonist bestknown for his comic strip“Broom-Hilda”.

Chapter 01
Introduction

Announcer: Russell Myers is best known for his newspaper comic strip “Broom-Hilda”. He was born in Pittsburgh, Kansas, but the family moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, when he was 7. He was sketching and drawing while attending Lanier Elementary, Wilson Middle School, and Rogers High School. Russell attended the University of Tulsa, where his father was a faculty member.

After Russell’s first comic strip submission for syndication failed, he began working for Hallmark Cards in Kansas City, Missouri in 1960 as an illustrator of greeting cards. The idea for Broom-Hilda came from writer Elliot Caplin, brother of cartoonist Al Capp. Elliot Caplin described the character to Myers, and Myers then designed the characters and wrote the scripts. Broom-Hilda was first published on April 19, 1970, and was carried by the *Tulsa Tribune*. Now fifty years later in 2020, the *Tulsa World* continues its publication.

Listen to Russell talk about his days in Tulsa, his work at Hallmark Cards, how he came to create the character of Broom-Hilda, and his 1970 Cadillac. . . on the oral history website *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.

Chapter 02 – 6:20
Myers Family

John Erling: My name is John Erling, and today’s date is April 20, 2020.

Russell, would you state your full name, please?

Russell Myers: Russell Benton Myers.

JE: And your date of birth?

RM: October 9, 1938.

JE: And that makes your present age?

RM: Eighty-one.

JE: I am in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and we're obviously recording this by phone. Where are you, Russell?

RM: I am in Grants Pass, Oregon.

JE: Before we move on anymore, we have this coronavirus, COVID-19. How is that affecting you and what are you thinking about these days as we're facing this?

RM: Well, I just read yesterday that Oregon is in the bottom five of the states affected by it. And I'm in a small town in the southern part of the state, away from the majority of the population. So, I think we're in what you might call a "safe zone." Eh, it shut down most of the places that I like to go. And being as elderly as I am, when I do go to the store, I wear one of the masks and try to be as careful as possible. But mostly I'm just annoyed by not having all my conveniences at hand.

JE: Yes. Well, you sound like you're in a safe place, so you can control this.

RM: One of the safer places, I think.

JE: Right. Jimmy Trammel of the *Tulsa World* had a really nice story on you in Sunday's paper, April 19th of 2020. You may not have seen it yet, but he did a great story and a long story on you. And I know when you see it, you'll be very happy.

RM: I'm sure I will because Jimmy's a very nice fellow and I've talked to him.

And speaking of comic books, he's a comic book collector. He told me he had between and thirty and forty thousand comic books.

JE: [laughing] Wow. He's a—

RM: I told him, "Either you're single or have a very understanding wife."

JE: Yeah [laughing].

RM: So, yeah, he has an understanding wife.

JE: Well, he put us together and I'm happy for that. And then the special cartoon that you drew for the *Tulsa World* in that article, this major banner headline of your story, and it was pretty cute.

RM: Good. I sure hope he sends it to me.

JE: I'm sure he will. [laughing] Where were you born?

RM: Pittsburg, Kansas.

JE: Your mother's name?

RM: My mother's name was, well, Maxine Myers.

JE: Tell us about her. Where was she born? Where did she grow up?

RM: She grew up in Norton, Kansas. A little town that was around three thousand people; up in the northwest part of Kansas, close to the Nebraska border. You want a little history?

JE: Yes.

RM: She was apparently pretty smart, I guess, and skipped two years in high school. At the age of seventeen, enrolled in a music college in Lindsborg, Kansas. She wanted to be a classical musician.

Well, two years later, the Depression hit, 1929. Her father, who was a banker, had no more money so she had to quit college. Came back home, got a job in the office at the local high school, where she met my father. She was essentially derailed from her hopes for the rest of her life.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound). What was her personality like?

RM: She was Miss Social. She loved people, she loved to meet people, go out and talk to people. She lived to be ninety-nine.

My father died first. She was the last person that ever wanted to leave a party. My father was always having to say, "Come on, Maxine, time to go. Time to go."

And I always said that she lived so long because my dad wasn't there to tell her it was time to go.

JE: [laughing]

RM: She belonged to social clubs and went to the symphony, and just a very outgoing person—a gentle soul. She loved to be around people.

JE: Your father's name?

RM: Father's name was Russell Brooks Myers.

JE: What did he do for a living?

RM: He was a schoolteacher. I always admired him for this: He came from a very, very poor farm family. He was the oldest of six children. For some reason, they were able to scrape up enough money to send him to a little community college nearby. And his dad went with him.

They were trying to pick out a profession, what to do, and the advisor said, "Well, if you only go two years you can be a schoolteacher."

So his father said, "He'll be a school teacher."

He went for two years and became a high school teacher. He was one of those guys that was raised in a one-room schoolhouse—grades one through eight, where the older kids taught the younger kids.

Anyway, he got out into the world—it was the time of the Depression. He made a thousand dollars a year, payable in nine months. So he had to save enough to get through the summer. And he went nine years to school, summer school, got a master's degree so he could teach in college during the Depression.

I thought that was pretty gutsy of him.

JE: Yes.

RM: And then he wound up teaching in Pittsburg, Kansas, at what was then Kansas State Teachers' College. Then later got a job at Tulsa University, 1946. The family moved to Tulsa and he taught business courses at TU until he retired.

JE: So his personality must have been fairly outgoing as well?

RM: Naw—he was Mr. Even Disposition. He just never seemed to vary too much on either side of the center line, a peaceful disposition.

My mother was a great talker and he was a great listener. That made a good marriage because they were married for sixty-five years.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

RM: She talked a ratio of about ten words to one on his words. He was good at listening and she was good at talking.

JE: [laughing]

RM: But I say he was a very even, very solid, solid, dependable guy. A little example, if you told him, "Hey, a week from Friday I have a dental appointment at ten," a week from Friday that morning, he'd say, "Don't forget your dental appointment."

You always knew where he was, you always knew what he'd be like. He was just solid as a rock type guy. No imagination whatsoever. That came from my mother's side. But Mr. Dependable.

Oh, one final thing about him, he was very careful with money because he had to be. I told him, I said, "You don't know where your first dollar you ever earned is but you know the name and address of its second owner."

JE: [laughing] Did you have brothers and sisters?

RM: I have one sister, Melinda, who is seven- and one-half years younger than I am.

Chapter 03 – 5:30
Moved to Tulsa

John Erling: You did move to Tulsa. How old were you when you moved to Tulsa?

Russell Myers: Seven. So that's pretty much all I remember is Tulsa.

JE: Your artistic bents, did you get any of that from your parents at all, do you think?

RM: Well, the artistic bent, as far as I can figure out, came from my mother. Because she wanted to be a musician and she was interested in music and that sort of thing. [laughs]

It did not come from my dad, who was just the very pragmatic, as I said, unimaginative guy. So if it came from anybody, it came from her. And really, nobody else on either side of the family, that I'm aware of, had any artistic interest.

JE: What did your father do at Tulsa University?

RM: He taught business courses.

JE: Do you remember the first school you attended?

RM: Lanier, Sidney Lanier.

JE: When does this sketching and drawing come into your life?

RM: As early as I can remember. If I was bored by a class, I'd try to sit as far as I could in the back and draw and not pay attention. I'd draw in my little notebook and just do what I wanted to do. I just always was interested. I thought the funny papers, the Sunday funny paper, was the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen in my life.

Back then, the Tulsa newspapers, the Sunday comic section, was sixteen pages.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

RM: And the pages were larger than they are now. And I was smaller, so by comparison, they were just magic. And this was before television. I thought they were just the greatest thing and I wanted to do it. I wanted to know about it.

JE: So you were naturally born with an interest in this from the beginning?

RM: It seems like it, now that I look back. I was not aware of it at the time, but you talk about people born to something, I guess that's what I was born to, because it was the only thing I ever wanted to do. And, fortunately, it was the only thing I could actually probably do, so I was lucky to be able to do it.

JE: Were your parents supportive of your early sketchings when they saw you in grade school?

RM: My mother was supportive of my interests. My dad looked on, he never said anything against it but I don't think he understood it. And about the only thing he ever said was, "Don't you think you ought to maybe get a degree in something else in case you had to fall back on something?" Which is reasonable enough, because if I had a kid who said, "I want to be a cartoonist," I'm not sure how I'd react to that either.

JE: Do you have children?

RM: Yes. I have a son and a daughter.

JE: Are they interested in cartooning?

RM: Neither one of them are remotely interested. One of them is an attorney, a patent and copyright attorney. And the other, daughter, and her husband, are in the horse business. They raise, train, sell horses.

JE: When they were young and they saw your cartoons in the newspaper, were they taken with that? Or that was just Dad?

RM: Yeah, they just seemed to take it for granted. Neither one of them showed much interest in it. I can't remember them as saying, "Oh, gee, Daddy, teach me how," it was just the way it was. And they had their own interests, which were different from mine.

JE: The first house in Tulsa, do you remember that?

RM: The first house was at 1243 South Jamestown.

JE: What do you remember about that house and the neighborhood?

RM: Oh, I remember that there were several kids in the neighborhood and we'd all go out and play. We'd run through each other's yards. We played Cowboys and Indians. We all had cap guns and we shot each other to death a thousand times. And just ran through everybody's yard; nobody seemed to complain. It was just kind of like a little *Our Gang* movie growing-up experience.

JE: So then your middle school experience, where was that?

RM: Middle school? I went to Wilson. In 1951, my parents built a house on 4th Street, just a block north of Will Rogers High School. Back then, you just walked or rode everywhere. I rode a bike to Wilson and nobody seemed to think there was anything wrong with that. And then when I went to high school at Rogers, of course, I was a block away, so that was convenient.

And then I went to TU, and that was a mile away. So everything was located nicely.

JE: In Wilson, did your drawing come to the attention of a teacher?

RM: I think so, I think I had some drawings in the yearbook. I couldn't swear to it. I know I did in high school; I was kind of the high school cartoonist. I had stuff in the yearbook and that sort of thing.

JE: You probably had a paper route back then, so you were throwing—

RM: I did, I delivered the *Tribune* for four years. From the time I was twelve to sixteen. And I think I could walk that paper route today and still get three-fourths of the houses correctly.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). When you were throwing those papers on your paper route—

RM: Yeah.

JE: . . . you were so happy to be delivering comic strips to those houses.

RM: Well, actually, what I was doing was making a dollar a day. Which I thought was pretty good. [laughs]

JE: Yes. When did you graduate from Rogers High School?

RM: Nineteen fifty-six.

JE: Ed Dumas was an announcer for KWGS, campus st—

RM: Oh, Ed, yes. [laughs] When I was at college, Jay Jones was on the radio. He was the disc jockey and Ed was there. Jay called Ed "Tiger" because that's pretty much the opposite of what Ed was like. I enjoyed their program and it seems like I entered a contest or something of some kind. And I don't remember the specifics. And I won the contest, maybe it was for a drawing, I don't know.

So I went down there and they interviewed me on the air and we all got along real well. So I went back. I went back several times and was there in the studio and sometimes on the air a little bit.

I played a tuba solo on the air once, I remember that.

JE: [laughs]

RM: That was a lot of fun, and that's how I knew Ed Dumas.

Chapter 04 – 3:45
First Comic Strip

John Erling: Okay, so when you're fourteen, fifteen years old, you're thinking, *I'd like to have my comic strips purchased by newspapers*. If you were thinking that, when did you submit your first comic strip?

Russell Myers: I submitted my first comic strip when I was sixteen years old. Sent it to all the syndicates. Of course, it was immediately rejected by all the syndicates because it wasn't any good. But that was the first time.

I was a student of comic strips. I collected comic books. I still have two thousand of my comic books from childhood. And with my out of town newspapers—there's a big newsstand down on Tulsa that had papers from all over the country. I'd buy those and cut the comic strips out and look at them.

And one little anecdote—when I was in high school, there was the dreaded junior's theme. You were supposed to spend an entire year researching the subject and then write about a forty-page theme on it. Haah (sigh), well, I waited until a week before it was due and just sat down and wrote it out of my head about comics and cartoons and I got an A+ and a commendation. I was an encyclopedia, I just studied and studied and studied this stuff. I didn't particularly know I was going to do it some day, I was just fascinated by it.

If I was interested in something, I could learn it. If I wasn't interested in something I had trouble learning it. But anyway, I still have that junior theme with my A+ on it.

JE: What was your first comic strip about?

RM: As I recall, it was about a little policeman, a little officer.

JE: At that age, you were reading other comic strips. What comic strips were you fascinated by?

RM: I loved Dick Tracy. I loved all the shooting and the violence and the weird villains and the humor in it. I liked the work of Roy Crain, who did Buz Sawyer. And I loved the Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge comic, done by Carl Barks. Those are my three comic heroes. I like other things but those were the ones I liked the most.

And I was able, fortunately, to meet all three of those fellows later in life.

JE: Let's talk about that in a little bit here.

RM: Okay.

JE: So you went on to TU and you got a degree at TU, did you?

RM: Yes.

JE: And that was in cartooning, right? [laughs]

RM: [laughing] Huh, well, no, it was just a liberal arts degree. But I specialized in commercial art. That was the closest thing I could get to what I was really interested in. And in my

house, my family, it was just assumed without ever even discussing it that you went to college. High school was not the end of your education, college was, it was just an extension. So I went.

And my dad, being on the faculty, faculty kids got to go for free except for the cost of fees and so forth, which, as I recall, was about thirty dollars a semester. So that was nice.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

RM: My grandfather had seven grandchildren, this will tell you how long ago it was, he wanted all his grandchildren to go to college. So he set aside a thousand dollars a year for college. That's how much things have changed.

Well, I lived at home and it didn't cost anything to go to college, so I had a thousand dollars a year spending money, which is about five thousand dollars now. So that's about as much I clover as I've ever been in my life.

JE: [laughing] At TU then, were you called upon for your cartooning talent at school?

RM: Well, I still did cartoons, in the yearbook, I think. I have kind of a vague memory. I was in college and sort of goofing off and that kind of thing. But still drawing cartoons and still interested in them. But, hah (sigh), I don't think it was as vivid, as strong as it was when I was younger. Because I was out in the world, I had my own car, and I could do more things. But I was still interested in it.

JE: What year did you graduate from TU?

RM: Nineteen sixty.

Chapter 05 – 3:40
Hallmark Cards

John Erling: Then what did you do after graduating from TU?

Russell Myers: Well, in your senior year recruiters would come around looking for people. And the recruiter from Hallmark Cards came, looked at my portfolio, and I was hired to go with what was then called the "Contemporary Department of Hallmark," which was the humorous part. Thank God for that because it was the only job offer I had. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't of got it.

So I moved to Kansas City. And I started working for Hallmark. I worked inside the building in a department for five years. Then I worked outside on a freelance basis for five more years. During that second five-year period, I was trying to sell a comic strip. I would do one every year, get rejected, do one the next year, get rejected, and pout, and then do another one.

JE: That had to be difficult to be rejected so many times. How did you handle the rejection?

RM: I don't think I handled it particularly well. [laughing] It would make me very unhappy but I was determined. I'm kind of a grinder; if I get my mind set to something, I do it. But, yeah, it's never nice to be rejected, of course, but I realized that the job at Hallmark was more or less a dead end. I'd reached about as high as I could ever go income-wise there. And I wanted more. That comic strip was the only way I knew to get more. So I kept trying.

I got failure down to a science. In Kansas City, I could get on a plane at eight in the morning, get to New York at noon, their time, and I could go into the six major syndicate offices, get rejected by all of them, and get home by midnight.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

RM: So I worked it out pretty scientifically.

JE: Did you ever doubt your talent, that you weren't good enough?

RM: I don't remem—I probably did. Probably wondered, *Well, gosh, what am I doing wrong?* Or *Why can't I do it?* Or, when you get rejected a lot, sure, you begin to doubt yourself, I suppose. I do not remember specifically to the degree but I suppose that happened.

JE: But you must have felt, *I'm just as good as anybody else*? And so—

RM: Yeah, there were periods where I thought, *Hey, why don't they realize what a dadgum genius I am.* And then other periods, like, *Well, maybe I'm not so hot*, you know? It's just kind of an up and down deal.

JE: Yeah. Were you ever in the service? Vietnam came along and did you have to deal with any of that?

RM: No, when I was in high school I injured my back. I crushed a vertebrae in my back and that made me 4-F.

JE: Your Hallmark cards, who knows, many of us listening might have purchased some of your cards. Was there a certain brand of card? You said it was the humorous.

RM: They were called "Contemporary" cards at the time, and it was kind of a big move for Hallmark. Hallmark was such a traditional situation. It was run at the time by the founder Joyce Clyde Hall. And he really didn't like the idea of these cards that didn't have little flowers and daisies and sweet poems on them but were kind of acerbic and humorous. But they made money, so that was okay.

And we were kind of a little department. There were around twenty people in the department from all over the country. We were sort of set aside off in a corner where we wouldn't bother the real people. We did our thing but they were profitable so they let us do our thing. And it was great. I had some of the best times in my life there.

As I said, there were people hired from all over the country whose specialty was being funny. And that was a roomful of funny people trying to out-funny each other. It was just great.

JE: So you probably got ideas from each other.

RM: Yeah, and you bounce things off each other and just really—I didn't appreciate it at the time how much fun it was.

Chapter 06 – 3:00
Broom-Hilda

John Erling: We're observing the fiftieth anniversary of Broom-Hilda.

Russell Myers: Yes.

JE: How did you come up with Broom-Hilda?

RM: Well, okay, there was another fellow in the department named Charles Barsotti who decided he'd like to do a comic strip. And he didn't know anything about it, so I was the expert; I knew everything about it, how to do it, and all that stuff. So I showed him.

Well, he sold his comic strip. And I was just fit to be tied. And I said before, "I didn't know whether to kill him or kill myself." Because I was the one that was supposed to sell a comic strip. But he did it.

And he, shortly after that, moved to New York and he went to a party and he met a man named Elliot Caplin, who was the brother of Al Capp that did Li'l Abner. Elliot wrote comic strips and was in the comic book business and he was a hustler and entrepreneur. Always had ideas. I don't mean hustler in a bad way, but he always had projects going. And he asked Charlie, he said, "Well, I've got an idea for a comic strip about a witch named Broom-Hilda. You know anybody that might be able to do it?"

And Charlie said, "Well, yes, I do."

So I was sitting in my little office one Friday afternoon and I got a call from this very mellifluous New York person who identified himself and said that Charles Barsotti had said that I might be able to do a comic strip. And would I send him some of my greeting cards?

I said, "Well, yeah." So I was stunned about this, it came out of the blue. So I sat down over the weekend and did the first six comic strips about Broom-Hilda. Just came off the top of my head without any real thought. And I drew them and I sent them to him.

He got them a few days later and he said, "I love it. I ran down the street and I sold it to what was the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York News Syndicate*. Bang, bang, just like that. So I was one of those overnight successes after fifteen years of trying.

JE: What a thrill.

RM: Oh, it was, it was just like that old saying you hear about a door opens up in life and you go through it and that was that. All Elliot contributed was the name Broom-Hilda about

a witch, that was his thing. And I've always done it all myself. He acted as my business partner, taking care of all the business things for thirty years. And he died about twenty years ago.

We were total opposites in every way, background, politics, everything, religion, everything, we're just opposite. We always got along very well. We never debated touchy subjects and just got along fine.

JE: I should say, you were married then when living in Kansas. Is that true?

RM: I got married in 19—I've been married fifty-six years so it would be 1974, yeah.

JE: And your wife's name?

RM: Marina, M-a-r-i-n-a. She was born in Italy, she's Italian.

JE: So what a thrill then for the two of you that you had hit it big time with Broom-Hilda.

RM: Oh, tell me about it. I was doing what I always wanted to do and my income went up. What could be better?

JE: It probably doubled or tripled even more than that.

RM: Well, it started out I was making more than in the greeting card business. Then it just slowly crept up as they sold more papers. I was just in clover there, it couldn't have been better.

Chapter 07 – 10:25
It Is a Job

John Erling: Al Capp, of course, became very famous. He had a certain personality that was interesting. He'd be on talk shows and all. Did you ever meet Al Capp?

Russell Myers: I never met Al. Al had an apartment in New York, and I was walking along the street in New York with Elliot. He said, "Would you like to meet Al?"

I said, "Well, sure."

So we went to his building and he was out, so I never got to meet him.

JE: He was famous for Li'l Abner.

RM: Yes, that was his claim to fame, yes. That was a big, big comic strip back when comic strips were big.

JE: Is it possible for a cartoonist to have two different cartoons going at the same time?

RM: Yes—mostly with help. Mort Walker did Beatle Bailey and then he created Hi and Lois and Boner's Ark and a couple others. But he had a staff of people, but it would be very difficult.

I had a second comic strip going for a short period at one time and it didn't get in enough papers to make it worth continuing to do it. And it was too much to do myself.

JE: You lived in Oklahoma and we are the land of, as they see us, cowboys and Indians, did you try to do cartoons that would have been about cowboys and Indians?

RM: You know, maybe, I'm sorry, I can't remember all the things that I failed with. That might have been because that would have been kind of a fun subject, but I really can't say for sure, I just don't recall.

JE: While you were given the idea of Broom-Hilda—

RM: Yes.

JE: You had to develop Broom-Hilda's personality.

RM: Yes. I did everything. All I was given was the name Broom-Hilda, about a witch. That was it. So, as I said, most comic strips have planning and thought behind it. But I just sat down that weekend and the first six strips just bounced out of my head complete. That was all there was to it. It just went from there.

JE: So then immediately you thought of Broom-Hilda as being a very inept witch, a poor representative for her witchcraft?

RM: She, well, yeah, inept and cranky. Humor mostly is derived from negative situations so if I had a kind, sweet, competent witch it wouldn't have been that funny. So she was grumpy and inept and that sort of thing. Which to me was a richer grounds for humor.

JE: It caught on and I don't suppose you can say, "I know why it caught on." Maybe it's just one of those mysteries.

RM: It caught on because, I guess, people wanted to read it. That's the only thing I can tell you. [both laughing] I'm in a business where if folk like radio, television, movies, if people like it, it works. And if they don't like it, you're history.

JE: And then I suppose you were wondering whether your hometown newspaper was going to carry it or not.

RM: They bought it right the first day. And bless their hearts, they've been carrying it for fifty years.

JE: How many newspapers have carried your cartoon at any one time?

RM: Ah, I used to keep track a long time ago, but if I were to lose a paper it made me unhappy. So I quit keeping track. The number I heard, was at its peak, it was in around three hundred papers.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound). That's got to be a thrill to know that.

RM: Well, yeah, it is. I always wound up comparing myself to Peanuts and Garfield, which were in over two thousand.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

RM: [laughing] But that's not fair to me. So I never was at a Peanuts or Garfield level, as far as circulation or income, but it was a nice living. We never missed a meal.

JE: When you hit it big with Broom-Hilda, about how old were you?

RM: Oh, well, fifty years ago I was thirty-one.

JE: Thirty-one. So you were able to do some nice things. Probably bought a new car, as a matter of fact.

RM: Oh, yes, that was one of the first things I did, I ran out and bought a new car, nouveau riche.

JE: You—

RM: [laughs] And then not long after that we moved from Kansas City. We moved to Santa Barbara, California. My wife said there are better climates in the Midwest, essentially. And I didn't know any better. But then I found out, yeah, there were better climates. And I have severe ragweed pollen allergies. To my amazement, there are places that don't have ragweed pollen. So I was thrilled about that too.

JE: And then you moved to Oregon to Grants Pass?

RM: We lived in Santa Barbara for seven years. We moved to Oregon forty years ago. And I'm still in the same house on the same street.

JE: Early on you were named the National Cartoonist Society Top Humor Strip, that's—

RM: Yeah, I won the award for the Best Humor Strip, I think it was 1975.

JE: You've been the creator of Broom-Hilda all fifty years. Some of them now are passed on from one creator to another. So that's also another feather in your hat.

RM: Oh, yes. Yeah, well, I'm entering, or beginning to enter more and more into it, I guess, if I may use the term, a fairly elite club of guys. Not elite but exclusive or maybe a club with not many members of people who have done a comic strip all by themselves for fifty years.

JE: How do you keep coming up with ideas?

RM: Well, it's a job. I treat it as a job. I look around at things and I look at other cartoons, like priming a pump. I don't use anybody's ideas, but if I read some cartoons and I start thinking about cartoons and subject matter, it's a process I can't fully explain to you. It's kind of like mental gymnastics. You take something, anything, like a fireplug or a tree or a cat or something, and then you twist it around and make something funny out of it. And I can't describe the mechanics of it specifically. It's an ability like some people can do math quickly in their head or some people can run a four-minute mile. It's just one kind of something that you can do.

JE: Would current events ever make it to Broom-Hilda? Like would this COVID-19 ever make an entry?

RM: No, not really. I don't deal with that stuff. They live off in a forest all by themselves and, yeah, I deal with things like computers and telephones. No, I'm not into the current event stuff.

JE: So then that can't spawn any new ideas, they just have to come out of that little world that you live in with Broom-Hilda. And you are there thinking about not just her but you think about these other characters as well.

RM: Yeah.

JE: Gaylord Buzzard and Nerwin and Wolfie and Big Lump. And you're having conversation with all these people, it's not just Broom-Hilda.

RM: Well, I have, essentially, just really four main characters in the comic strip and over the years it's simplified down. But those four characters and I deal with those and they seem to cover all the ground that I want to cover.

JE: We should say that Broom-Hilda was adapted twice for animated television series. Thirteen episodes of *Broom-Hilda* in a Filmation series, Fabulous Funnies on NBC.

RM: Yes, back in the, oh, when was it, '70s, I guess it was, yeah.

JE: You really became extremely successful beyond the newspapers.

RM: Yeah, it was for a while, yes. I had my fifteen minutes of fame, and fifty years of pain, whatever you want to call it.

JE: And then in many books as well.

RM: Yes there were a lot of reprint books.

JE: Has to be fun to know that you've had that going for you and that it's still interesting to people these fifty years later. And—

RM: Well, it really is, the way the newspaper pages are set out, there's, generally speaking, a set number of comic strips. They don't add comic strips, they replace comic strips. If they're going to put a new one in, and old one goes out. So it's kind of survival of the fittest.

In my beginning, I was chomping at the heels of the old guys. And now new guys are chomping at my heels.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

RM: So it keeps going like that.

JE: You think Broom-Hilda has changed over time and with your age you see things differently now that you couldn't have seen when you were in your thirties?

RM: The artwork has simplified quite a bit. For one thing, size of the comic strips as they are printed in newspapers have shrunk several stages over the last fifty years. So drawings now are simpler because if they were as complex as they were fifty years ago it would just be too much. So I simplified that.

Heh (sigh), I don't know that I can answer that question specifically because I would have to look back at what I've done to see the changes. I just keep plugging ahead and don't think too much about what went on previously.

JE: How far ahead are you with Broom-Hilda?

RM: Oh, my, that's almost embarrassing. I'm about a year and a half ahead. I used to hear stories about old guys that were always on the deadline. They blew up in West Chester County outside of New York and they'd be coming in to try to get the last strip done before they got into the city to deliver it. And go to sleep on the train and miss their stop.

I'm kind of a belt and suspenders guy.

JE: [laughs]

RM: I always figured that no matter how much money I earned I spent less and always have a backlog prepared and, you know, emergency funds. And so I have an emergency fund of strips. I always wonder why they had trouble with deadlines because I found it fairly easy every week to just do one or two extra strips. That gave me time to take a vacation or prepare ahead or whatever you wanted to do.

JE: Yeah.

RM: Right now during this virus thing about all I've got to do is just sit in the house and draw pictures.

JE: So you're churning them out, I mean, even today or yesterday?

RM: Yeah. Well, I work five days a week, I don't ever do anything on weekends.

JE: Did you keep certain hours, like eight to five, and, *I'm in the office and I'm going to do cartooning*? Or how did that work?

RM: The office was a room in my house. Yeah, I do, I was kind of a middleclass middle American middle of the day guy. I get up and do the morning things and then I sit down and go to work and do them in the middle of the day. But, yeah, I keep pretty regular hours. They're going to vary some from day to day, depending how long it takes to get the stuff done. But, yeah, five day a week worker.

Chapter 08 – 9:17
Cartoonist Ideas

John Erling: You know, there must be something in the water here in Oklahoma. We've talked about Dick Tracy, Chester Gould, he was born in Pawnee, Oklahoma, in 1900. Then we have Bill Mauldin cartoons of Willie and Joe.

Russell Myers: Oh, yes.

JE: He joined Oklahoma's 45th Division, and that's where he drew his humor. He was a Santa Fe, New Mexico, native and he joined the 45th Division at eighteen.

RM: Okay.

JE: We also have Carole and Jack Bender who have continued the Alley Oop comic strip.

RM: Yes. As I recall, they live about a mile away from my parents last home.

JE: It's interesting with Dick Tracy and Chester Gould, Chester introduced the two-way wrist radio.

RM: Yeah.

JE: And the closed-circuit television, both of which were later invented. I'm wearing a Dick Tracy watch, so to speak, right now, an Apple watch, where I can talk into it just like Dick Tracy did.

RM: Yeah! I know. He prided himself on that. Things that were ahead of time, yeah.

I mean this in the kindest way—Chester was kind of a functional madman. His imagination was so bizarre, if you read the strip, the characters, the villains, and B. O. Plenty and Gravel Gertie, he just, he was just wonderful. And yet if you'd meet him, he'd look like a little banker.

When I met him in Chicago, he had these little flat-brim hat, suit and tie, overcoat, and he looked like my grandfather, who was in the banking business. But he had the brightest blue eyes. It was just like there was this wildness lurking behind these eyes. He was great.

JE: He was talking to you, another cartoonist, and he was very respectful, I'm sure, of your work.

RM: I guess he was; I don't remember. I just remember I looked into those eyes, I thought, *Oh, wow*, just blazing out at me. Out of this otherwise very, uh—I don't know what to call him, a staid, average-looking Midwestern guy.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound). I was reading that back then when I was in my early teens and I remember when he introduced Sam Catchem to the cartoon strip.

RM: Yeah.

JE: And Sam Catchem had a hard time catching on. They were always a little leery of Sam Catchem and he was always this person that it seemed like he was always new, and they hadn't totally accepted him. And I haven't read it for a long time, I don't know, I hope they've accepted Sam Catchem by now.

RM: What I remember about Sam was he always had a cigarette sticking out of his mouth.

JE: That's—[laughing]. Did you have cigarettes or beer with Broom-Hilda?

RM: Yeah. I'm kind of almost a throwback to my parents' generation. I really enjoy vaudeville humor and the early radio humor shows. And when Broom-Hilda started out she smoked cigars and was drinking beer and that kind of stuff. And that became not the thing to do so that phased out of the strip. But, yeah, I was that way for a while, sure.

JE: Here I have the comic pages from yesterday's *Tulsa World*. If you have any comment about them. Of course, Blondie, did you have any interaction with the creators of Blondie?

RM: No, Chic Young created Blondie and as I recall, he died around 1970.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

RM: His son took it over but I don't know if that meant he just hired writers or what, I really don't know.

JE: And there's Garfield.

RM: Jim Davis, when he first got the comic strip—I had formed my own corporation early on and he called me, when he was in his first year. He said, "I hear you have a corporation."

I said, "Yeah."

And he said, "Well, how does that work and so forth?"

And I told him, "Okay," and explained it to him.

He said, "Thank you," and that was the last contact I ever had with him, just that one phone call.

JE: How about Beetle Bailey? Mort Walker's?

RM: I met Mort Walker, who is now dead, I made it a point to try to meet as many of these people as I could. Way back when I was beginning, I was star struck. And I went to Mort's home in Connecticut, and met him and he was very gracious and we spent some time together. That was the only time I ever saw him.

JE: Was he a military person? I wonder why he chose the military theme.

RM: Yeah, he was in the army and that's how he got that idea. He was a Kansas City boy.

JE: Well, it's fun to go through this and then to turn the page and there's Broom-Hilda.

RM: Well, good. You know, it's funny, it's a very isolated business. You sit in your room or wherever you sit all year and do it by yourself. And the conventions are about the only time that you meet the other people, unless you happen to live in an area. Used to be many of the cartoonists lived in New York or outside of New York, because that's where the magazines and syndicates were headquartered. But now they're spread all over the country.

So unless you go to the conventions, you just don't meet these people.

JE: There you are, Russell Myers. I never thought I'd be talking to the creator of Broom-Hilda. Sometimes when you go into your office, as you say, and you want to set to work, do you have as writers do, they'll have writers' block, days that just ideas do not come to you?

RM: No, I have never had writers' block. What I've had is quality variation. What I mean by that—I've always believed that if you just put a whole lot of stuff down on paper, you'll get enough out of that to do your work. So what will happen, let's say, I write ten ideas. One day eight or nine of them are usable. And the next day I write ten and one or two of them are usable.

So the law of averages, well, just gives me enough to keep going. But I've never not been able to put something on paper.

JE: Well—

RM: It just depends on sometimes it's good, sometimes it's not good.

JE: Do you ever run your ideas against your wife and say, "What do you think of this?"

RM: No, I never have. She's like my kids, she's not particularly interested I what I do. She's glad that I did it and we all eat well and everything. But, no, not really.

JE: So your ideas are in the office? I mean, sometimes my best ideas come when I'm driving around. Do ideas come to you? Go out for a walk or drive and then you think, *Oh, Broom-Hilda could say this*?

RM: No, they don't come to me. I say, "Okay, it's time to write." So I write the stuff. I write it down on paper and then put it in my notebook and then I really don't think about it after that.

A couple of weeks ago I got an idea, which surprised me, because I never get them unless I'm actually trying to write them.

JE: You just have it. You improved and you learned along the way, but it's just that quirky gift that you were given.

RM: That's the best way that I can describe it. You have this little gift to take ordinary things and tweak them and make them, hopefully, funny. And it's just something that you can do. Yeah, that's just the way it is and it's not something that you can explain except, I think we explained it pretty well the way you said it.

JE: Did most of these other cartoonists, Chester Gould and so forth, do you sense that they also started young? They just couldn't help from keep doing it?

RM: I've read a lot about Chester. Chester wanted to be a cartoonist and he tried and he tried and he tried for ten years. He just worked his butt off for ten years and couldn't get anything going. And so finally in 1931, yeah, he got Captain Patterson up at the *Chicago Tribune* to accept Dick Tracy. First it was going to be called Plain Clothes Tracy, but then they shortened it to Dick because Dick was short for cop back then.

But he, in a similar sense to me, just tried and tried and tried and finally succeeded, you know, overnight after ten years of trying.

JE: Have you sensed that sometimes you've strayed off the sense of humor for Broom-Hilda, and then you thought, *Wait a minute, I'm getting away, I'm not the way it was and I need to get back on track again*?

RM: Uh, I don't remember anything like that. Once or twice I tried some political thing, you know, make a political comment, and I was so bad at it that I thought, *That's not for me*. But mainly, no, I don't recall anything like that. I've kind of gotten the groove and stayed in it.

I think I'm aware of my limitations now.

JE: How is now, you do a cartoon and then you send it on to where?

RM: I send it to a place called Quad Graphics up in Wisconsin, and I'm not really sure how it works anymore. They take care of the printing and it goes from there. Then I think it's sent back to the syndicate where my editor checks it or edits it and then it's sent out to the newspapers. I honestly am not sure of the mechanical details of how it works.

JE: Has your editor ever rejected, "Oh, you can't run this one"?

RM: Hmm (thoughtful sound), I've had the same editor for almost twenty-five years. It's a woman that I just dearly love and we get along. And I pretty much mastered the boundaries of what I can and can't get away with.

JE: [laughs]

RM: And she has me two or three times in ten years suggested that something might not be appropriate. I've gotten to where now I can smell it ahead of time. And if I think something is not going to be a good idea then I'll ask her and usually she agrees that it's not. But, essentially, no. I'm one for easy ones because I don't give her any trouble and I don't require any nursing or anything.

Chapter 09 – 5:45
1970 Cadillac

John Erling: So then you just see yourself doing this until—you'll never lose interest unless your health—

Russell Myers: Yeah. I don't want to predict. I'll say this, for the foreseeable future, I intend to keep doing it. But you never know what the future brings, to quote an old cliché.

JE: I can't get rid of this question, I've got to ask: What was the make and model of that first new car you bought.

RM: Oh, ha-ha-ha, I bought a 1970 Cadillac.

JE: [laughs]

RM: Coupe DeVille, brown with a beige top. I'm kind of a car guy, I've always had a lot of cars and I collected cars for a while. Back in the '60s, I was buying America muscle cars. And when I sold the strip, I became nouveau riche for a little while and bought that Cadillac. I got that out of my system and then did other things.

JE: Wow. Did you buy a brand-new house?

RM: No, I owned two houses in Kansas City, not at the same time but moved from one to the next, and we stayed in the second house after the strip was sold and then moved to California. So, no, I did not buy a new house.

JE: Oh, my, that Cadillac, that was wonderful.

RM: Yeah. Oh, that was quite a big boat, I was pretty thrilled with that.

JE: And now today, Cadillac has a whole different image.

RM: Boy, it does. They really lost their way. In the '80s, they were taking Chevrolets and putting Cadillac names on them and they were just awful cars.

JE: But now it's more geared to maybe a younger crowd and—

RM: They're trying.

JE: Yeah.

RM: They're trying, but I still don't think they know quite what they're doing. They used to be the standard of the world and now they seem to be kind of the confused standard of the world.

My in-laws bought a 1985 Cadillac Fleetwood, which is the big one, and the engine had 145 horsepower.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

RM: And in Santa Barbara there were hills and that thing would barely go up hills. [laughing] And then they took the small Chevrolet and made a Cadillac Cimarron out of it. All they did was take the Chevrolet and put leather seats in it. They just ruined themselves.

JE: [laughing]

RM: They're trying to come back but they've tried several different things. They've tried to be sporty, they've tried to be luxurious, it's like someone kind of going around in circles, not knowing what direction to go in.

JE: Were you interested in cars when you were, say, a fourteen-year-old boy living here in Tulsa?

RM: I've always been interested in cars. Since I was a little kid I was interested in cars. I like them and fascinated by them and still am, to some degree, yeah.

JE: You remember in Tulsa what was a car that you thought was really, really special at that time?

RM: My first nice car was a 1955 Plymouth that I bought, I think, in 1957. I drove that for about fifty thousand miles and that was the nicest car at the time I'd ever had.

JE: Do you remember any names of the car dealers back then?

RM: When you ask me a specific question I can't remember. If we quit talking about it, later I can probably remember some of those car dealerships.

JE: Right. What about—

RM: Wat Henry, I remember Wat Henry Pontiac. Greenleaf Cadillac in Tulsa, and a Cox Motor Company.

JE: Yeah. What about hamburger stands or restaurants?

RM: Ha! Harden's Hamburgers, down at 11th and Pittsburgh was Harden's Hamburgers. I made a dollar a day and I would frequently go and spend twenty-five cents of that dollar on hamburgers.

I'd come home and my dad would say, "Well, why do you do that? I can make you a better hamburger at home, cheaper."

"I didn't know, I just did it."

JE: [laughs]

RM: That's the one I remember was Harden's, Johnny Harden.

JE: What about clothing stores downtown? Or department stores?

RM: Well, then, everything was downtown. I could get on the bus at my house and ride down on 4th Street and get off at 4th and Main. Brown Duncan was there, and then there was Vandevers. North of there were a couple of places that my dad would go. He always had good suits but he would wait for the sales and he would go buy his stuff on sale, suits and shoes. Those are the only two I can think of right off hand.

There were the four theaters, Rogers, Orpheum, Majestic, and Rialto, all right there within four blocks of each other.

JE: Since you had this fascination to be a cartoonists, what about cartoons in the theaters? Were they available and were you fascinated by that?

RM: Oh, yes. They would have what they called Cartoon Carnivals, and the Saturday matinees for kids where they'd have seven, eight, nine, ten, twelve, I don't remember, cartoons, just show one after the other. And then they chose some kind of cowboy movie, I guess. Yes, I went to those and loved them. They'd have Saturday afternoon double features. Rogers Theater, that was the one closest to me, on Saturday afternoons. You got in for a dime and you got popcorn for a dime.

JE: That didn't fascinate you to want to be making the film cartoons at all?

RM: No, no, I just liked it, I just liked to go look at them. But, no, I didn't want to do animation cartoons, no.

JE: Do you remember names of the mayor or do you know some names that were public, it would come to mind when you lived here?

RM: I don't think I ever paid much attention to that. My mother liked museums, she liked to go to Gilcrease and the one...Phillips.

JE: Philbrook?

RM: Philbrook, Philbrook, yeah. In school, I think when I was younger, they would have summer art classes down at Philbrook and we'd go down there and run around on the big grounds down there.

JE: Did you show an interest or a flair beyond cartooning to paint or draw landscape or cows or flowers?

RM: Oh, not really. I did it because you had to do that in art courses. But, if I recall, I wasn't very good at it.

Chapter 10 – 5:18
Advice to Young Cartoonists

John Erling: What would you say to a youngster who's listening to this now and they want to be a cartoonist? Would you tell them to go into it or forget it?

Russell Myers: I'm reluctant to give advice like this. Well, the newspaper cartoon business has been shrinking ever since I've been in it. As we all know, newspapers are diminishing and comic strips are not what they were in their heyday. And I would say that they probably will continue to shrink in the future. So having said that, I don't believe that the

opportunity is there nearly as much as it was when I started. So I guess I'd have to give some advice like my dad, "Well, maybe you need something to fall back on."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

RM: On the other hand, you'd hate to discourage the one guy that was going to be the next Garfield or Peanuts. So you have to be careful there.

JE: Yeah, I guess there'll always be cartoons of some sort. There'll certainly be comic books.

RM: Well, when I was a young fellow, there was all kinds of magazines that bought cartoons. *Collier, Saturday Evening Post*, and all these things. There was a big market for that. That slowly dried up and all the guys that did those magazine cartoons are kind of left hanging. About all that's left is the *New Yorker*. And I guess *Playboy* still carries cartoons, I don't know. But that's something that almost doesn't exist.

I guess there's a lot of online stuff now being done but I don't know enough about how to make a living doing that. I guess if you want to do it for a hobby or something that's okay, but to make a living at it, I wouldn't know what to tell somebody.

JE: Didn't Barsotti, who spotted your talent, didn't he become famous in the *New Yorker* for his cartoons?

RM: Barsotti?

JE: Yes.

RM: Yeah. Oh, yeah, Charlie, that's what he really wanted to do. He had this comic strip going for a few years. And I thought, *Oh, you're so lucky*. He didn't really want to do it; he wanted to do magazine cartoons and he became one of the *New Yorker's* top cartoonists.

Funny story: He became the cartoon editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

RM: A job he really wanted, really loved. And had kind of a little form of nepotism, I sold a few cartoons, I think four, to the *Saturday Evening Post* and a few weeks after he got that job, the *Saturday Evening Post* went out of business.

JE: Oh.

RM: That ended that.

JE: Did you say earlier that you have a collection of comic books that go way back?

RM: Yes. Oh, when I was a kid, I bought a lot of comic books. They were ten cents. Or I could go down to the used bookstores. There was Terry Bookstore on Main and Miller's and buy them used and I could get them for a nickel. So I would haunt those places and go through them. And I bought them.

After I got older, I stored them in my parents' house. My dad was always wanting to get rid of them. "Well, try and get rid of those things."

"No, no, no." I didn't, I still have them, I have two thousand comic books dating back from the '40s and '50s.

JE: Oh, my. Now that's a collection you could retire on if you sold it.

RM: I'm not so sure, because the value of comic books depends a lot on condition. And most of mine are either bought used or ones that I read that the condition isn't great. Plus I was not interested in the superheroes, which is where the big money in the collecting is now. So I kind of missed out on that.

I have a few I think are of some value but a lot of them I don't think are worth much at all. I don't know what to do with those, frankly.

JE: What kind of comic book were you interested in?

RM: Oh, I loved the Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge that were done by Carl Barks. And there was the EC comic books back then, which were horror and war, that kind of stuff. And they had the best artists, really great stuff. I loved those. There were reprints in the Dick Tracy comic strips, and, oh, gosh, everything from Little Lulu and to Auntie Panda to horror comics, just a bunch of stuff.

I'd have to look back and see what I have.

JE: What will come of that collection?

RM: I don't know. I may just die and let my kids figure it out. I don't know what to do with hit. I would almost have to go through it comic book by comic book, then check values and figure out a way to sell them on eBay or go through Heritage Auctions, a place that does that in Dallas. It would take a lot of time. I think I'm just too lazy to do it.

JE: If there's a historical center or society in your vicinity in Oregon, maybe they would be interested in some of them to put them on display.

RM: That's a possibility. I do not know of any. As I say, I think the majority of them are not worth much of anything. But there are some gems in there. But, no, I don't know about anything like that. I've been out of the comic book collecting business for a long time.

JE: Right. Could be that Portland or Eugene would have a history center so—

RM: That's probably the closest place, if there was such a place.

JE: Well, this has been an honor for me to talk to you, Russell. And—

RM: Well, thank you.

JE: I really appreciate it and you've been so talkative and giving in the interview. I just will look at Broom-Hilda in a different way.

RM: Well, thank you. I don't have many secrets, so I just talk away. Well, it's been a pleasure to talk to you too, John.

JE: Thank you again for giving us this time. We appreciate it.

RM: It's a pleasure.

Chapter 11 – 0:33
Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience.

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