

# CHARLIE THORSON

## Bugs Bunny's Winnipeg Connection



**Bugs Bunny has had more creators than Liz Taylor has had husbands.** Ten years ago Jim Korkus explained it this way: "In *Funnyworld*, Bob Clampett tells how he created Bugs Bunny. But in [the original] *Take One*, volume 2, number 9, Tex Avery tells how he created Bugs...in the *TV Times* (from the *Los Angeles Times*) Chuck Jones says he created Bugs...in that same year there was an ad for a cartooning course, and the originator of the course, Bugs Hardaway, was identified as the creator of Bugs Bunny. But in Cecil Smith's television column, again in the [L.A.] *Times*, Fritz Freleng was identified as the creator of Bugs Bunny."

For some reason, Korkus left out Bob Givens and Leon Schlesinger, the *laissez-faire* studio head of animation at Warner Bros., who was more than happy to take credit for an employee's work. He omitted Mel Blanc too, even though Mel claimed that he did more than just supply the voice for Bugs. At the risk of fuzzing the matter even further, I'd like to add another name to the list: Charlie Thorson. In the preface to his children's book *Keeko*, Thorson is called the creator of "that brash creature Bugs Bunny."

Never heard of him? That's not at all surprising. Charlie Thorson worked for all the big animation factories during the golden age of animation, but he moved around a lot, never staying at one studio long enough to establish a profile. His tenure at Schlesinger's studio, for instance, lasted less than a year. In addition, Thorson was not an animator or an animation director. He was a character designer, and this part of the animation business and his contribution to it has never been adequately examined.

Charlie Thorson was 10 years older than Walt Disney and twice the age of most animators when he left Winnipeg in late 1934 to try his hand at animation. Before this he had been an illustrator for Eaton's mail-order catalogues. Back then the entire catalogue was meticulously hand-drawn—everything from clothes to jewellery to saddles to houses. After almost 20 years of seeing his best work consigned to Prairie outhouses, Thorson packed his portfolio and headed for Los Angeles. Walt Disney gave him a job on the spot. At first Thorson was just another cog in the Disney machinery that was gearing up for feature animation. But he was an irrepressible storyteller with a flair for drawing cute, cuddly animals in precise, attractive poses. As Disney's operation grew more specialized, Thorson became more and more responsible for drawing the model sheets that animators and their assistants would refer to for the precise dimensions and key poses of the characters in every movie. Thorson designed the characters and did the model sheets for some solid Disney classics: *The Old Mill*, *Wynken, Blyken and Nod*, *Country Cousin* and *Toby Tortoise Returns*. Two shorts were among his all-time favourite works—*Elmer Elephant* and *Little Hiawatha*. On both movies he did more than

**BY GENE WALZ**

All sketches courtesy of Dr. Stephen Thorson

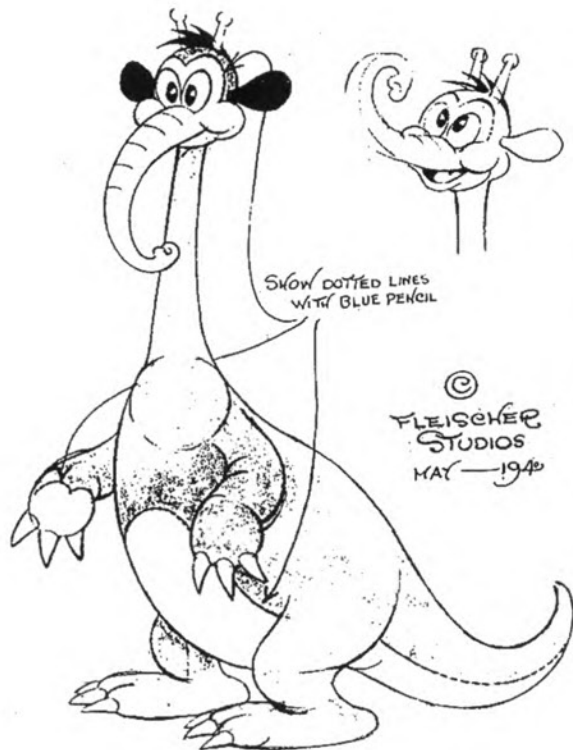
the character designs; he contributed storyboards and story suggestions. In fact, Walt Kelly, who was a friend of Thorson's from their days together at Disney, claimed that *Little Hiawatha* was entirely Thorson's doing.

When Kelly quit animation and turned to newspaper comic-stripping, he was so impressed with the tutoring Thorson had given him that he created a special character in his famous *Pogo* comic strip. The little raccoon, or "rackety-coon," is a Thorson-style creature according to Kelly. If you look at the menagerie of forest animals in *Little Hiawatha* and *Snow White*, you can easily see where the raccoon came from.

Around Winnipeg, however, Thorson is not known for his adorable animals, if he is known at all. He is a local legend among the Icelandic community (the largest collection of Icelanders outside of Iceland) as the man responsible for making Snow White an Icelander. It seems that Thorson let it be known that his character designs for Snow White were based on his romanticized sketches of a Winnipeg waitress who spurned his amorous attentions. The similarities between the Icelandic girl and the Disney character with the suspiciously Icelandic (or Canadian) moniker were uncanny. So many artists contributed to the design of the character, however, that it is impossible to state for certain that Snow White was Charlie Thorson's personal dream vision.

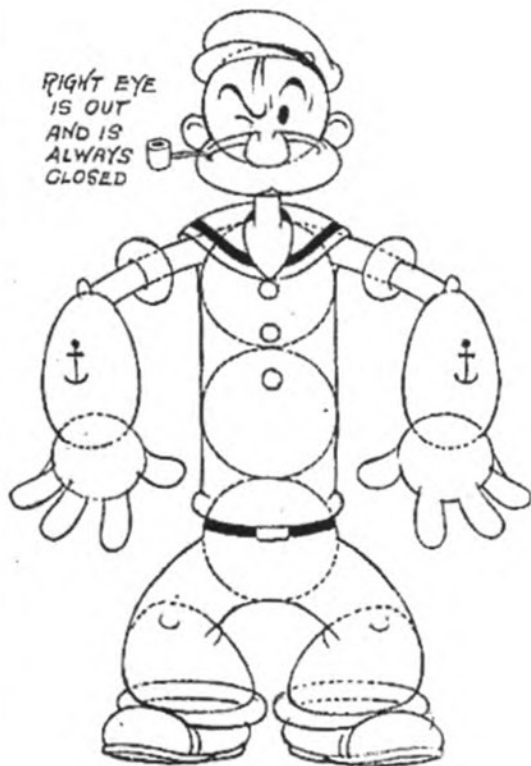
By the time *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was released in 1938, Thorson had battled with Disney and quit his job there. Although his role in story conferences are acknowledged in books on the film, Thorson's name is conspicuously absent from the credits. It drove him to fits of spluttering rage for the rest of his life, but oddly ensured that his contribution to animation would not go unrecorded. Because of Disney, Thorson kept a private archive of his favourite creations.





Thorson's character drawings for *Stone Age*, above, and the revamped Popeye, below.

At the height of his career Thorson moved easily from one major studio to another and was paid handsomely for his work.



**A**fter his stint with Disney Studios, Thorson moved to Harmon-Ising Studio and then quickly switched to MGM when offered a better position at an increase in salary. He was put in charge of redesigning the characters from comic strips. So when Leon Schlesinger decided to increase Warner's output of short animated movies, he found it easy to woo Thorson away from MGM by hiring him as his chief character designer. Schlesinger had just lost a couple of his veteran animators and likely hired the character designer to bring along two of his company's neophytes—Chuck Jones and Ben "Bugs" Hardaway.

Thorson had a profound affect on the young Chuck Jones, who spent his fledgling years imitating Disney-style animation. Jones's early films are anchored by cute Thorson-designed creatures such as Sniffles the adenoidal mouse, Inki the politically incorrect African boy, his inscrutable mynah bird antagonist, and the curious puppy. Bugs Hardaway relied less slavishly on Thorson's Disney-honed expertise, but his debt to Thorson is still unmistakable.

When *Porky's Duck Hunt* became a hit in 1937, thus beginning the long career of Daffy Duck, the studio's response was predictable: take the same plot and main character and invent a new antagonist. The rabbit that appeared in the pre-Thorson *Porky's Hare Hunt* was as physically nondescript as a character could possibly be, but the idea was a good one. When Hardaway sought to revive it, Tedd Pierce, head of Schlesinger's story department, approached Charlie Thorson for a new design. Thorson could have easily dusted off a familiar character from his Disney days, Max Hare, whom he had designed for *Toby Tortoise Returns*. Drawings in his portfolio indicate that he considered it. But he settled on a goofier, more bottom-heavy version. He completed the model sheet and left it on Bugs Hardaway's empty desk. To ensure that there was no mistaking his efforts, he printed "Bugs bunny" on the bottom of the sheet with typical Thorson-style disregard for the niceties of apostrophe usage. Thus the bunny not only got a new look but a name. A year later Tex Avery asked Bob Givens to redesign the bunny again. Givens went back to Thorson's design of Max Hare and came up with the lankier, more erect version of Bugs that is closer to the Bugs we all love today.

Thorson designed one other world-famous character for Schlesinger's studio, Elmer Fudd, basing the image on the precocious infants he had drawn for Disney and perhaps appropriating the name from one of his favourite Disney creatures. The footloose Charlie Thorson stayed less than a year at Warner's before he was lured to a similar position in Miami at the studio built there by Max and Dave Fleischer.

He was brought in specifically to punch up the design of the Fleischers' first feature, *Gulliver's Travels*. His contribution is the distinctive Twinkletoes character, but Thorson was so dissatisfied with his rushed, last-minute work that he refused to allow his name to be cited in that film's credits. It was his last chance for movie recognition.

Thorson's work at Fleischer studios marked the peak of his output. He redesigned the children's book characters Raggedy Ann and Andy for the screen; he also redesigned all of the Popeye characters to make them more amenable to the new

assembly-line production of animation (one of the few things for which he can be faulted). Most importantly, he designed over 100 whimsical, wonderful creatures for the ill-fated *Stone Age* series, an obvious prototype for Hanna-Barbera's *Flintstones*. When that black-and-white, Disney-style series failed and Fleischer Studios was taken over by Paramount, Charlie Thorson moved on to Terrytoons, and then Columbia/Screen Gems and finally George Pal Studios. By then he was interested in other things and just didn't have the free hand and encouragement he previously enjoyed.

After the Second World War, Charlie Thorson returned to Winnipeg to pursue his new interest in children's book design. For this Canada and Canadians will be forever in his debt. Two of Canada's most familiar characters were created by Thorson during this period. In 1947, he designed a cuddly, Disney-style bear with an unruly shock of orange hair. He gave the bear the same affectionate name he used for his own son—Punkinhead. The bear made his debut as Santa's sidekick at the Eaton's Christmas parade in Toronto. The following Christmas, Eaton's distributed a small, free children's storybook called *Punkinhead, the Sad Little Bear*, illustrated by Thorson. Although (or perhaps because) it was a virtual ripoff of the Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer story and was used for the same bluntly commercial purposes, it proved immensely popular. For the next 10 years Eaton's produced a new Punkinhead booklet every Christmas. Thorson contributed precise, beguiling illustrations and major story ideas for the first three booklets. Then he had a boozy falling out with an Eaton's executive, and the series declined in quality and appeal.

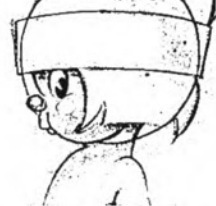
**D**own on his luck, Charlie Thorson volunteered his services to help the Toronto police department with its formerly successful but faltering traffic-safety program. Discarding their full-sized silhouette of a real elephant, Thorson reached back to his Disney days and created Elmer the Safety Elephant. The winsome pachyderm was unmistakably a copyright infringement but Walt Disney himself gave it his blessing, surely one of the few times this has happened.

Thorson spent his declining years in advertising. His distinctive creatures were featured on billboards, in magazines, newspapers and brochures across the continent. His final creative burst came at the Winnipeg studios of Phillips-Gutkin and Associates (PGA) in 1956. Although he was past official retirement age, Thorson spent a few months quietly providing fuzzy bunnies and other cartoon creations for PGA's nationwide animated television commercials. He then moved to Vancouver to be near his son. He died there in 1967.

Charlie Thorson created hundreds of distinctive characters, many of which still have a firm place in the world's imagination. And he designed many hundreds of model sheets to help his co-workers bring these characters to life through animation. At the height of his career he moved easily from one major studio to another and was paid

# MODEL SHEET Hiawatha

©  
WALT DISNEY PROD.



PEAK OF HEAD HIGH  
TO GIVE FLAT EFFECT  
TO BACK OF HEAD.



HIGH  
LIGHTS  
ON  
CHEEKS  
ON CLOSE-UP  
SHOT  
ONLY

**Little Hiawatha, for Disney, above,  
Elmer the Safety Elephant, below.**

**Elmer was Thorson's lasting gift to Canadian children  
for a generation of road safety.**



handsomely for his work. Thorson was modest about his accomplishments, preferring to see himself as one part of a creative team. Because he died before the serious study of the golden age of animation began, Thorson's artistry has been overlooked. It is only now that his role in the creation of Bugs and Punkinhead and the two Elmers—and who knows what else—is starting to be acknowledged. ■