



Illustration from *Robin Hood*, 1923. Oil on canvas, 33" x 22". Photo courtesy of Heritage Auctions, HA.com



Edwin John Prittie, May 16, 1909

# Edwin John Prittie: American Illustrator

by John L. Prittie

How did Edwin John Prittie, accomplished illustrator of classic novels for almost 40 years, come to end his career doing artwork for bubblegum cards? The answer might be...serendipity.

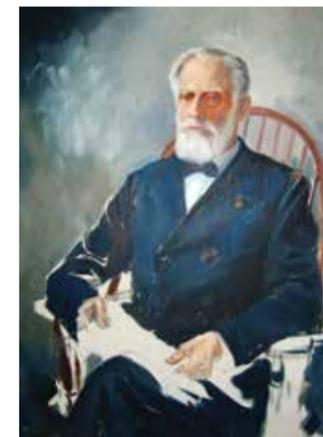
The cards in question are Gum, Inc.'s "Horrors of War" series, and other related card sets from 1938 to 1942. Prittie was above all else a "military man," so in the late '30s, with the economy still struggling and the market for mainstream illustration running accordingly thin, Prittie found a home supporting a team of unseasoned artists on an illustration assembly-line.

This is the story of his long career, and the path that eventually brought him to the door of Gum, Incorporated, where E.J. Prittie and Gum, Inc. may have been, if briefly, the best thing that could have happened to each other.

## HISTORY

Edwin John Prittie was born on July 11, 1879, in Gouverneur, New York, a rural northern town near the Canadian border.

Edwin's father, Thomas Prittie, was a Civil War veteran who raised young Eddie in a post-Civil War, enthusiastically military-minded environment. The elder Prittie served in the New York Volunteer Infantry in the latter stages of the Civil War,



Edwin's unfinished portrait of Thomas Prittie

and thereafter became an active member of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), a Civil War veterans' group (which was, among other things, the primary motivational force behind the national observance of Memorial Day).

Edwin attended many of the GAR "encampments" with his father. Still in high school, Edwin joined the Sons of Veterans of the Republic (SVR), the GAR spin-off for its following generation. In 1902, with a taste for the military but between any wars, he enlisted in the Pennsylvania State Fencibles, a National Guard affiliate with long historic roots, where by 1918 he attained the rank of colonel. All of these activities had a pro-

found influence on his interests and his art throughout his career.

Edwin attended the Gouverneur public school system and graduated (in a class of 11) in 1898, the year the USS Maine blew up in Havana harbor, resulting in war being declared at the end of April. In a commencement address given by the young artist, Prittie exhorted against political and financial self-interests who "have wished to make our war with Spain one of politics instead of one for humanity and honor." In his view, America's patriotic duty was to help the Cuban people against the "outrageous cruelty" of Spain.



Frontispiece from an unidentified book, 1908. Frederic Remington's influence is unmistakable



An illustration from the "Bumper the Rabbit" series

Perhaps the single most important influence on Prittie's early years was the artist Frederic Remington, who was born and raised in Canton, NY—virtually the “next town over”

from Gouvenour—in the sparsely-populated Adirondacks. Remington's star had been rising throughout Prittie's youth, and the “home town boy makes good” element served, at least in part, as inspiration for Prittie to pursue a career in art.

Prittie's father worked as a carpenter in New York's Thousand Islands region, and was reasonably prosperous during a boom in summer cottages for wealthy New Yorkers in the late 19th century. With his father's modest financial support, Edwin attended the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art in Philadelphia in 1899. He was a full-time student for two years, and continued with night school until 1905.

In September of 1901, Edwin began full-time employment illustrating for Gatchel & Manning, a prestigious printing and engraving firm in Philadelphia.

In 1905, Prittie received a “Certificate of Illustration” from the Museum School, as well as the Henry Perry Leland award for Best Work in Illustration. Later that year, he left G&M to begin a freelance career. He shared a studio with two other artists who became lifelong friends: Robert B. Stewart and Edwin F. Bayha. Bayha achieved modest repute in his own right for his magazine cover art.

Prittie immediately began doing commissions for advertising art, magazine interior illustrations for various companies, and book illustration for the Winston Publishing Co., with whom he was to have a relationship for nearly 30 years.

#### JOHN C. WINSTON PUBLISHING COMPANY

Prittie began his lengthy freelance relationship with Winston (eventually Holt, Rinehart and Winston) in 1905. He did dozens of covers, jackets, and interior pen and ink or wash drawings for numerous boys' adventure series by Edward Ellis, and girls' adventure series by Margaret Vandercook. He also illustrated or contributed to most of Winston's young adult non-fiction, reference, and text books.

In 1922, Edwin illustrated George Walsh's popular “Twilight Animal” (aka “Bumper the Rabbit”) series. The original pub-

lisher had used very primitive illustrations in the books. “We have a series of animal stories in hand...purchased from another publisher,” wrote the Winston editor in a 1922 letter. “We propose to make four new color plates for each of the 11 titles...These books are to be sold at a very low price.” Prittie was offered (and accepted) \$850 for the 44-piece job.

Throughout the 1920s and '30s, Prittie was the primary contributor of covers, interior plates, and ink drawings for Winston's “Classics Series.” Among the other artists contributing to this series were Frank Godwin and Frederick Richardson.

#### Winston Classics Illustrated by Prittie

- Mary Francis Story Book*, 1921
- Alice in Wonderland*, 1923
- Robin Hood*, 1923
- The Bible Stories Book*, 1924
- Grimm's Fairy Tales*, 1924
- Story of a Bad Boy*, 1927
- Black Beauty*, 1927
- The Little Lame Prince/Adventures of a Brownie*, 1928
- Wings of Flame*, 1929
- The Nurnberg Stove*, 1929
- Joan of Arc*, 1930
- Gulliver's Travels*, 1930
- Betsy Ross—Quaker Rebel*, 1932

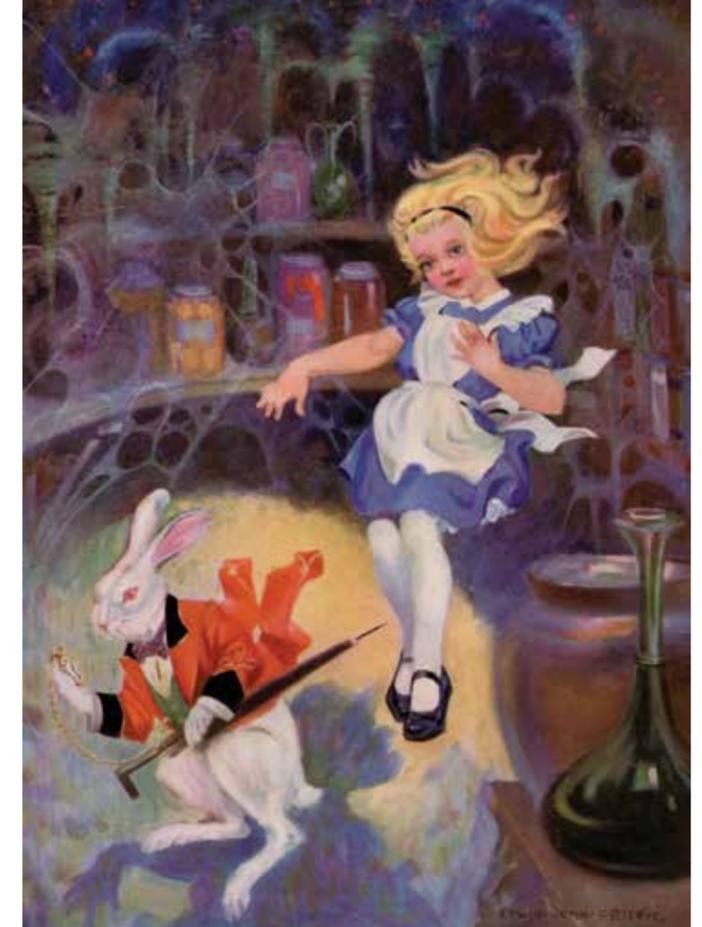


Illustration from *Alice in Wonderland*, 1923



Advertisement for Gatchel & Manning Engraving, circa early-1900s



**Men Pulling Sleds**  
**Frank E. Schoonover**  
 (1877 - 1972 )  
 Oil; 43" x 24"; 1929  
*"Collier's Weekly Magazine"*; 5/15/1926  
 #1433 in the Catalogue Raisonné

*Schoonover's remarkable winter trip to Hudson Bay during the winter of 1903-04 is well documented in his son, Cortlandt's, book, "The Edge of the Wilderness", Methuen 1974.*

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Frontispiece illustration for *Joan of Arc*, 1930

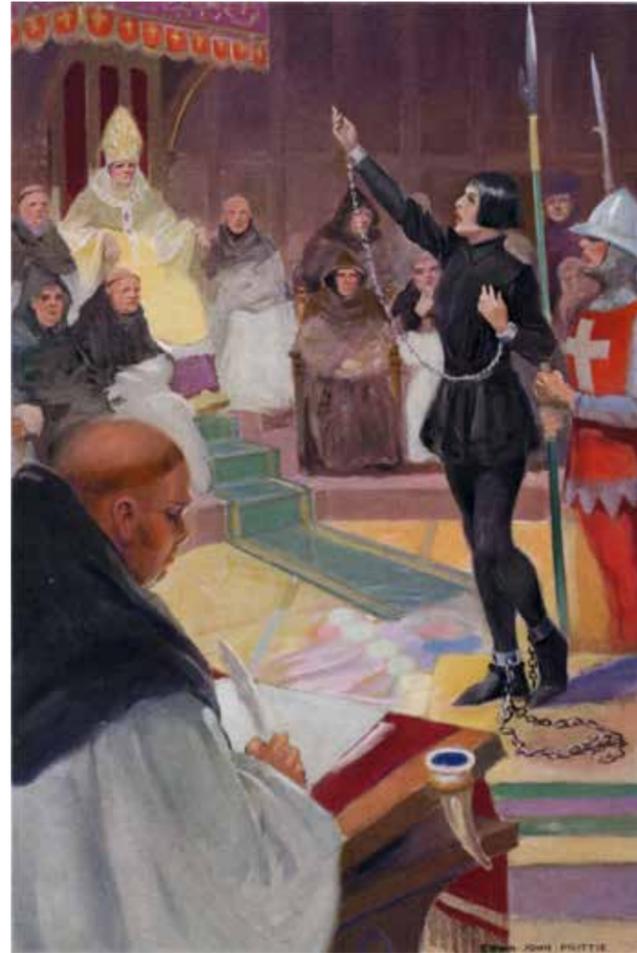


Illustration for *Joan of Arc*, 1930



Interior illustration for *Joan of Arc*, 1930



ABOVE: Illustrations for *Joan of Arc*, 1930 (details)

Author Mabel Dodge Holmes expressed her thoughts to Prittie after previewing the newly completed frontispiece for her book *Joan of Arc*, published in 1930. "I like it in the extreme and feel that my book will be very much dressed up thereby...I should like it if Jeanne could be made a little less pretty with a little stronger, more of the French peasant type cast of features...her hair should be made straight, without the fluff at the bottom...she ought not to be pretty." She closed with, "I particularly love the white horse—he is a sweet thing!"



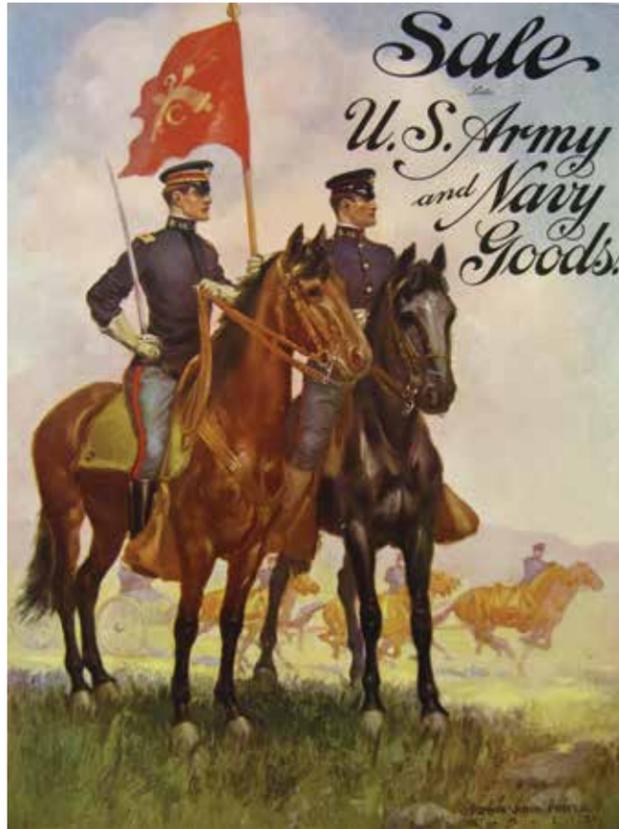
Illustration for *Robin Hood*, 1923. Oil on canvas, 33" x 22". Photo courtesy of Heritage Auctions, HA.com



Illustration for *The Story of a Bad Boy*, 1927. Oil on canvas, 27" x 18". Photo courtesy of Heritage Auctions, HA.com



Illustration for *Robin Hood*, 1922



Prittie used himself as the model for the figures in this advertising illustration, 1912



Book cover illustration for *Sergeant York—The Last of the Long Hunters*, 1930



Interior book illustration for *Wings of Flame*, 1929



Interior book illustration for *Wings of Flame*, 1929



Ellen "Ella" (French) Prittie was the model for this unknown magazine illustration

### FAMILY AND INFLUENCES

In 1913 he married Ella French, a fellow-artist with "Gibson Girl" looks and a successful career doing fashion ads and news illustration for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* newspaper. Ella died tragically of illness in 1917, but her face is often seen in Prittie's early illustrations.

Due to his age, the recently widowed Prittie was unable to join the active armed forces during WWI. A letter writing campaign by Prittie and numerous fellow State Fencible officers failed, much to his dismay, to sway the Army enlistment bureau. He remained active in both the SVR and the State Fencibles his entire life, and his military experience was a pervasive influence in his art.

In a speech to the Philadelphia Society of Allied Arts in the 1920s, Prittie stated, "There is one phase of illustrating very dear to me personally, and...that is the illustration of the military and naval life of this country... [Some] argue that there are so few people who care for the army or know what is right as to detail of uniform as to make any effort for accuracy on the part of the artist unnecessary." He went on to discuss the importance of an authentic depiction of the details when illustrating military subjects, as a measure of respect to the men involved.

When Prittie was illustrating Winston's *Sergeant York—The Last of the Long Hunters*, he asked his publisher to seek some details from Sgt. Alvin York regarding the critical moments of the battle. York's response, as forwarded by the editor, is on the next page; the resulting illustration is shown above.

Dear Mr. Prittie:

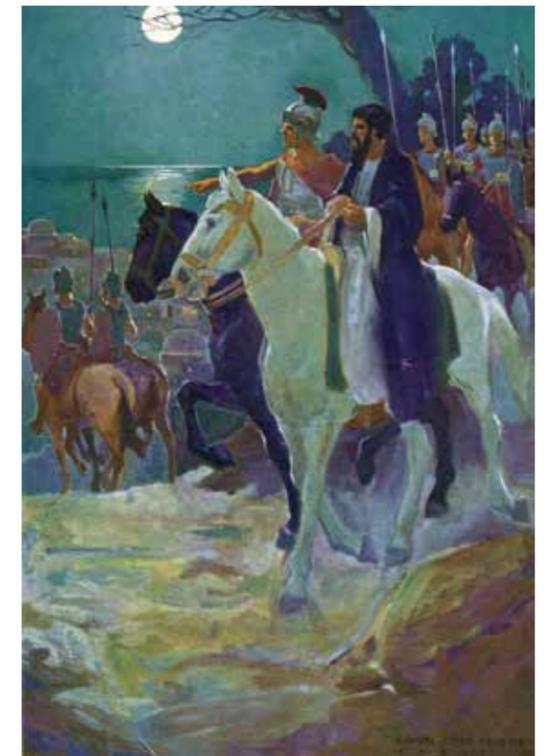
As I wrote you on the 19th, I took up the several matters with Sergeant York as referred to in my letter to you. I am enclosing copy of the letter I sent to him. This morning I received a telegram from him reading as follows: ANSWERING LETTER MY POSITION WAS ERECT HAD REVOLVER AND RIFLE DID NOT WEAR OVERCOAT SINCERELY SGT ALVIN C YORK

This definitely defines the several details we were in doubt about and should therefore enable you to proceed with the drawing of the jacket at once. It may also help you in the preparation of some of the other drawings you have to make.

In 1921, Edwin (known by friends as "Eddie") remarried to Meta Thierry, and in 1922 they had their only child, son Thomas. Recurring faces in many of Prittie's works bear strong resemblance to his gray-bearded father, Thomas; his young son "Tommy"; and to the artist himself.

### THE BOOK OF LIFE

Prittie's second largest commission was actually outside of his Winston portfolio. This was a contract to illustrate an eight-volume set of high quality, densely illustrated Christian books entitled "The Book of Life." Prittie was a Methodist, with moderate religious convictions. Two of his Winston books and numerous cover and interior illustrations for magazines were religiously and/or biblically themed, so he was well-acquainted with the subject matter.



Interior book illustration for *The Book of Life*, 1923

Prittie was commissioned to produce approximately a dozen dramatic color plates and an equal number of black and white drawings of biblical scenes. These supplemented hundreds of photographic and artist renderings, mostly from extant sources.

The illustration shown was originally envisioned by the book's editor, and described in a letter to the artist:

"How would a picture of Paul going down by night from Jerusalem to Caesarea under cavalry escort do? You draw horses well, I know—a deep blue sky—moonlight—Paul on horseback—Roman cavalry—spearmen in the background...I should think it might appeal to you."

The painting was an afterthought by the publisher, who felt he needed it to round out the set. It was painted gratis, and under enormous pressure to get the work submitted so as not to delay printing. In light of this, it is interesting to contrast the upper half of the piece with what seems to be a hurriedly-finished lower half.

### COMFORT MAGAZINE

Beginning in 1926, Edwin illustrated covers for the monthly magazine *Comfort*, published out of Augusta, Maine, by the John Gannet Co. *Comfort* was popular with rural women, who were its target market. Its cover themes tended toward folksy, light-hearted slices of American farm life. Prittie was born and raised on a farm, and summered in the Oswego, N.Y. farmhouse to which his father had retired. He knew personally the simple, depression-era rural life that he expressed on his

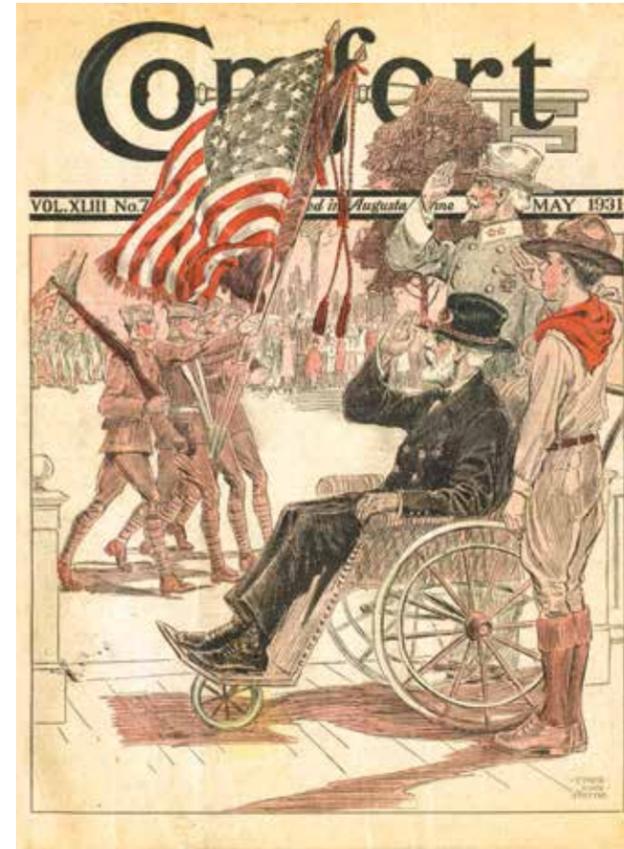
*Comfort* magazine covers, and he soon became their exclusive cover artist, eventually going on to illustrate roughly 150 covers over a 15-year span, from 1926 to 1941.

At its peak around the turn of the century, *Comfort* boasted the largest circulation of any subscription magazine in the country—at over one and a quarter million subscribers. *Comfort's* popularity was due in large measure to a very low subscription cost, owing to the magazine being primarily an advertising vehicle. As such, it relied on advertising revenue—and that, in turn, depended on its large readership. It also relied on low production costs. It was printed in black and red on a two-color press, using newsprint paper. As the artist's proofs in this article show, the two-tone process actually required pen and ink drawing, not true painting or wash. Prittie was clever in his use of subjects to which pseudo-browns, pseudo-flesh-tones, and reds, could bring an almost full-color feel to the black and red prints.

Prittie began doing the *Comfort* magazine covers in 1926, and with only a few exceptions produced all of the covers from 1929 to 1941. The magazine continued briefly without cover art, then ceased publication in 1942.

Demand for illustration waned throughout the 1930s, due in part to the Great Depression, and was exacerbated by the growing use of photographic illustration. Prittie's last work for Winston was in 1932, and monthly *Comfort* magazine covers alone did not provide a sustaining income.

In 1936, Disney was recruiting artists in the Philadelphia area, and Prittie submitted a letter of introduction. In response,



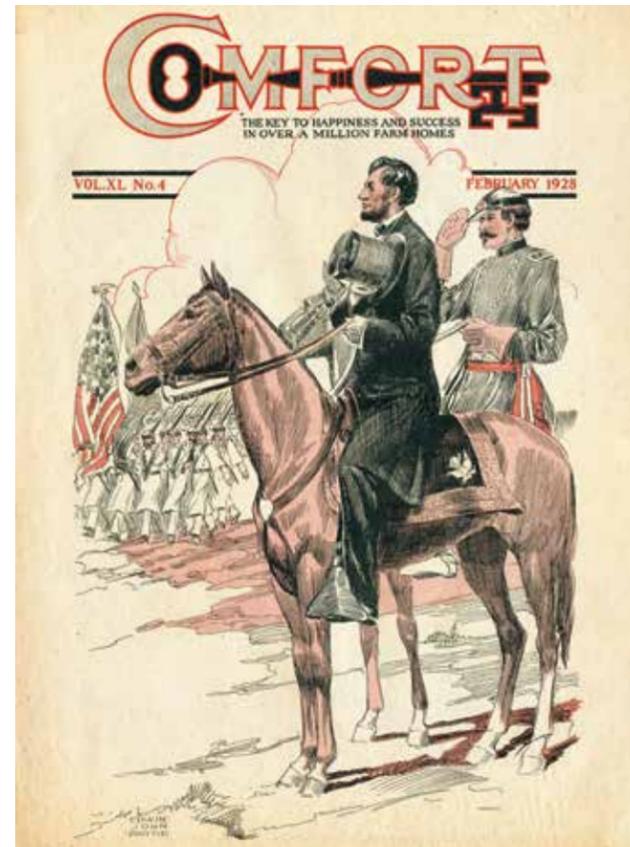
*Comfort*, November 1936. Edwin's son Tommy (in Boy Scout uniform) stands behind his grandfather, Thomas, seated and shown wearing his GAR uniform



*Comfort*, January 1933



*Comfort*, January 1928



*Comfort*, February 1928



*Comfort*, November 1936. This cover is a self-portrait of the artist at 57



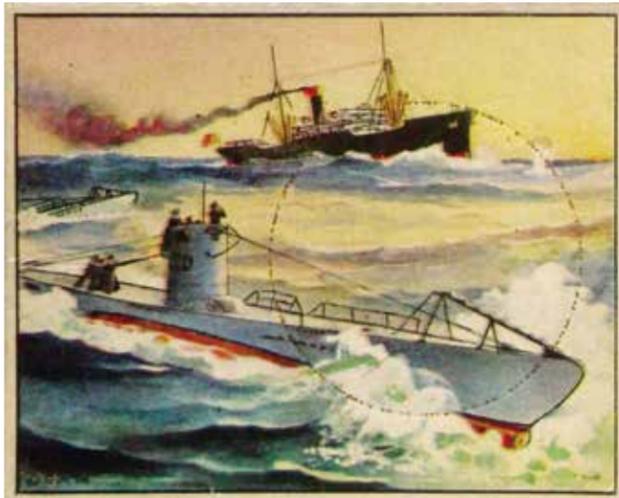
*Comfort*, December 1937



20 Naked Chinese Nationalists Charge Foe, card #10 from *The Horrors of War*, 1938



*The Lone Ranger Rescues Joan from the Pit*, premium card #3, 1940



Card #50 from *War News Pictures*, 1939



Illustration from *The Growth of Our Country*, 1933

he received a letter with a five-page questionnaire requiring numerous freehand drawings addressing nine scenarios, four of which involved “Mickey,” and all intended to establish how creative and funny a prospective artist was.

For example, “A fat man is wearing shorts and skipping rope...Is he funny to look at?...Is there life?...Is it tragic?”

Prittie did not pursue the Disney option, as he was not convinced of the long term viability of what he considered an “upstart” company. It also would have entailed moving to Burbank, California.

#### GUM, INC.

In 1938, Gum Inc., a Philadelphia-based chewing gum manufacturer founded in 1930 by J. Warren Bowman, put out a new series of trading cards called (and depicting) “The Horrors of War.” The slogan, “To know the horrors of war, is to want peace” was printed on the back of each card, along with a description of that card’s particular horror.

This noble, if thin, façade hid the true marketing plan which targeted adolescent boys with graphic depictions of mayhem, death, and dismemberment from then-current

international conflicts (mostly the Sino-Japanese War—of “rape of Nanking” infamy—but also the Italo-Ethiopian War, and the Spanish Civil War.) The cards were hugely successful. The last 48 cards of the series included depictions of Nazi Germany. The cards were discussed in *Life* magazine for their propagandistic effect on the youth of the time, and even President Roosevelt used the cards in presentations to Congress when discussing the current events of the increasingly war-torn world.

The George Moll Agency, Gum Inc.’s art and advertising agency, had hastily prepared the initial cards in the “Horrors of War” series using a small staff of young art students and recent graduates who worked as a team—assembly-line style. The initial cards were on the primitive side, and Bowman did not find them pleasing.

Prittie, at the time casting for work, was hired by the Moll Agency’s art director Charles Steinbacher in 1938, as primary illustrator and overseer of the rest of the artistic staff, providing military authenticity. Initially he provided the sketches of the general scene, but soon he was doing the central themes with the backgrounds filled in by others. Eventually, Prittie

was doing nearly all of the illustration. The point in the 288 card series at which Prittie joined the team is not known, and as a team effort the cards remained artistically inconsistent throughout, but later cards did exhibit marked improvement from the earliest cards. The artistry, and to a greater extent the subject matter, have made the set “the most popular and sought-after non-sports cards ever produced.”

The company did numerous war-related spin-offs of the original set. In one interesting example, from a 1939 series entitled *War News Pictures* (#50), Prittie apparently reprised his own textbook illustration of WWI German submarine activity from *The Growth of Our Country*, 1933.

One Gum, Inc. series illustrated entirely by Prittie deserves special mention. This is the “Lone Ranger” series, published in 1940, comprising 48 cards. This is one of the most famous chewing gum card sets ever printed, and its artistry has been highly praised by collectors. The images look more like quality book illustrations than trading card art, and bear obvious stylistic markers to Prittie (with a Remington influence).

*The Horrors of War* series was complete by the end of 1938,



Edwin John Prittie, circa 1945

but the spin-offs and unrelated series kept Prittie employed by Gum, Inc. until 1942. Ironically, America’s entrance into WWII, which some have argued may have been expedited by Gum’s war card sets, created shortages of sugar and latex. The company halted trading card production as it was no longer able to manufacture gum. That same year, *Comfort* magazine ceased publication.

#### LAST DAYS

At this point the 63 year old Prittie retired from full-time illustration. But to do his bit for the war, he took a job as draftsman with the U.S. Navy Yard in Philadelphia. With the close of the war, he took a similar position with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

In 1956, suffering from glaucoma and a detached retina, Edwin and his wife Meta retired permanently to their second home in Oswego, NY. Prittie suffered a debilitating stroke in 1960, and he died on February 20, 1963, at the age of 83. ❤️

— by John L. Prittie, 2013

John L. Prittie is the grandson of Edwin John Prittie, and compiled this biography from personal family documents and oral history.

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