

Edwin John Prittie (1879-1963): American Illustrator



Edwin John Prittie; taken May 16, 1909

Summary:

- Active in illustration from 1901 to 1942.
- Illustrator of children's classics for the John C. Winston publishing company of Philadelphia
- Exclusive cover artist for Comfort Magazine of Augusta Maine throughout the 1930s.
- Ended his illustrating career as the primary artist on Gum Inc.'s "Horrors of War" and "Lone Ranger" chewing gum card sets 1938-1942.
- His works are signed: E.J.P., EJP as a monogram in a circle, E.J. Prittie, Edwin J. Prittie, and Edwin John Prittie.
- Historically overlooked, Prittie was a prolific and noteworthy contributor to the body of illustration art of the Golden Age.

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 series from 1938-1942. 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.

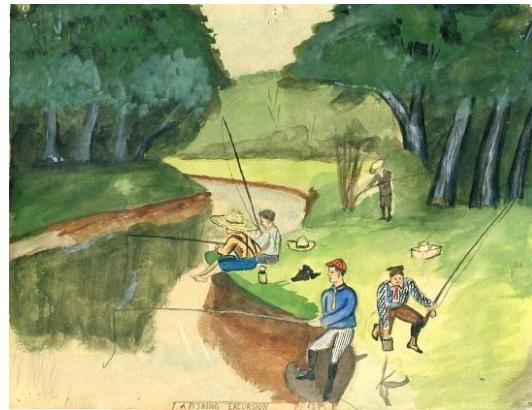
This is the story of his long career, and the path that eventually brought him to the door of Gum Incorporated, where EJP and Gum Incorporated may have been, if briefly, the best thing that could have happened to each other.

Personal History:

The Born July 11, 1879, in Gouverneur NY, a rural northern town near the Canadian border, Edwin attended, and graduated from, the Gouverneur public school system.



Displaying early talent for oils in 1891, age 11...



...and for watercolor with "A Fishing Excursion" in 1895. (The central figure seems to be EJP, age 16).

Edwin's father, Thomas Prittie, was a Civil War veteran who raised young Eddie in a post-Civil-War, enthusiastically-military environment. This had a profound influence on his interests, and his art, throughout his career.

Prittie graduated (in a class of 11) in 1898, the year the USS Maine blew up in Havana harbor, resulting in declared war at the end of April. In a commencement address given by the young artist, he exhorts 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." America's patriotic duty was to help the Cuban people against the "outrageous cruelty" of Spain.



1898 high-school-senior pencil and watercolor pieces, decidedly "remembering the Maine".

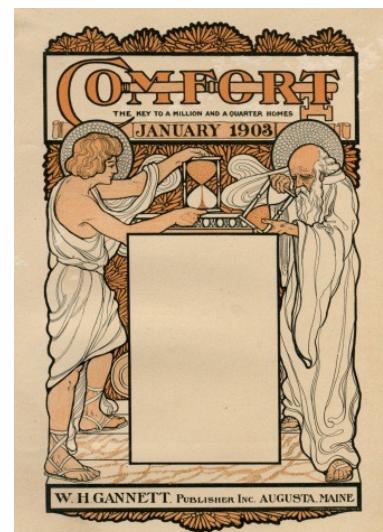
Prittie's single-most-important influence was Frederic Remington, who was born and raised in Canton, NY; virtually the "next town over" from Gouverneur – 30 miles away in the sparsely-populated Adirondacks. Remington's star had been rising throughout Prittie's youth, and the "home town boy makes good" element served, at least in part, as inspiration for Prittie to pursue a career in art.



In this frontispiece from an unidentified book, probably by Edward Ellis, the elements of Fredric Remington's influence are unmistakable.

Prittie's father worked as a carpenter in NY's Thousand Islands region, and was reasonably prosperous during a boom in summer-cottages for wealthy New Yorkers in the late 19th century. With modest financial support, Edwin attended the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art, in Philadelphia in 1899. He was a full-time student for 2 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.



This ad, by EJP, self-describes G & M's artistic services, which included illustration subcontracting for Comfort Magazine and Winston Publishing (this Comfort cover was an unused trial proof).

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 2 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.

EJP 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.



1911 pastel of the dashing artist in his PA State Fencibles uniform (drawn by studio-mate Rob B. Stewart).



Ellen “Ella” (French) Prittie, as model for unknown magazine illustration. (Caption: “She lifted it tenderly and read”)

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.

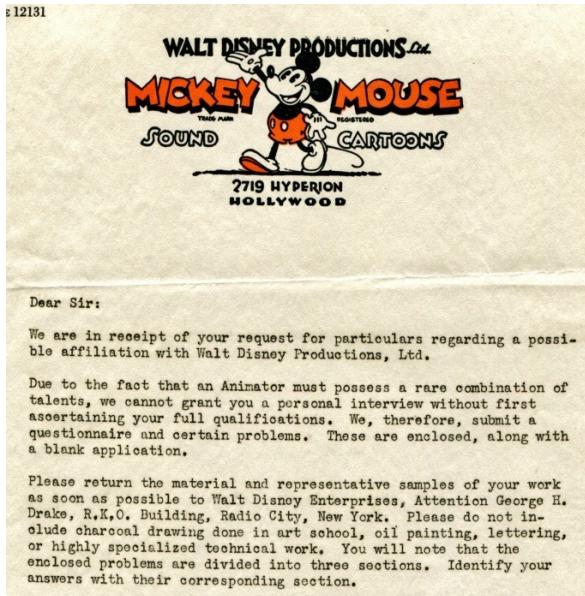
In 1921, Edwin (known by friends as “Eddie”) remarried to Meta Thierry, and in 1922, they had their only child, son Thomas. Recurring faces in many of Prittie’s works bear strong resemblance to his gray-bearded father, Thomas; his young son “Tommy”; and to the artist himself.

Beginning in 1926, Edwin illustrated covers for the monthly magazine “Comfort”. He soon became their exclusive cover artist, and went on to illustrate roughly 150 covers over the 15 year span from 1926 to 1941.



The artist (at age 57), though reputedly “a bit stuffy”, was not so stuffy that he couldn’t poke fun at himself in this self-portrait/self-parody. (Note the beads of stress sweat on the brow.)

Demand for artist illustration waned throughout the 30s, due in part to the Great Depression, and exacerbated by growing use of much-less-expensive photographic illustration. EJP’s last work for Winston was in 1932, and monthly *Comfort Magazine* covers alone did not provide a sustaining income.



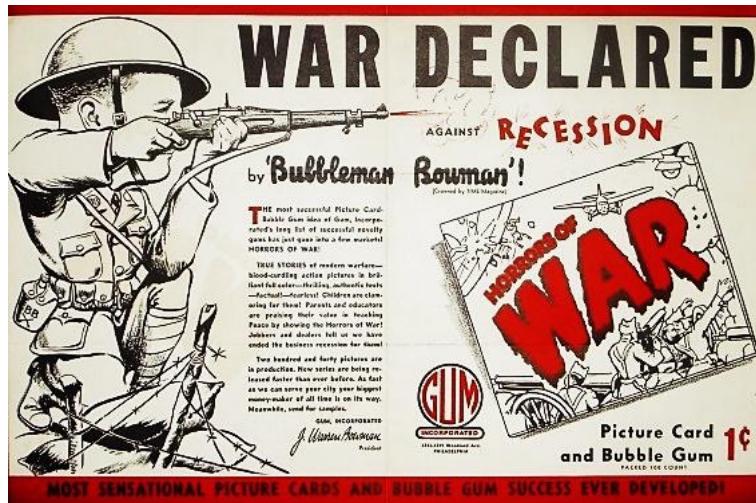
In 1936, Disney was recruiting artists in the Philadelphia area, and EJP submitted a letter of introduction. In response, he received this letter with a 5-page questionnaire requiring numerous freehand drawings addressing 9 scenarios, 4 of which involve "Mickey", and all intended to establish how creative 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?"

Or "...portray Mickey playing leapfrog over the Goof."

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.

In 1938, he began illustrating "Horrors of War" chewing gum trading cards for Gum Inc. In 1942, Gum Inc. suspended gum manufacturing due to WWII raw material shortages, and had no further need for card illustration. That same year, Comfort Magazine ceased publication.



18"x24" advertising flyer targeting retailers. (Caricature by EJP)



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 PA Dept. 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 was invalidated by a stroke in 1960, and died on February 20, 1963 at the age of 83.

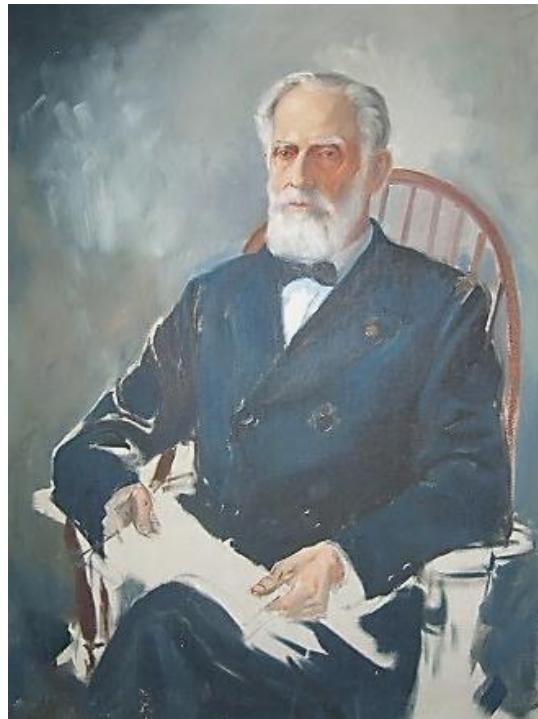
The artist circa 1945.

Military Career and Influence:

Prittie's father served in the NY Volunteer Infantry in the latter stages of the Civil War, and thereafter became an active member of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), a Civil War veterans' group (who was, among other things, the primary motivational force behind 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 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.



Edwin's unfinished portrait of his father, Thomas Prittie.

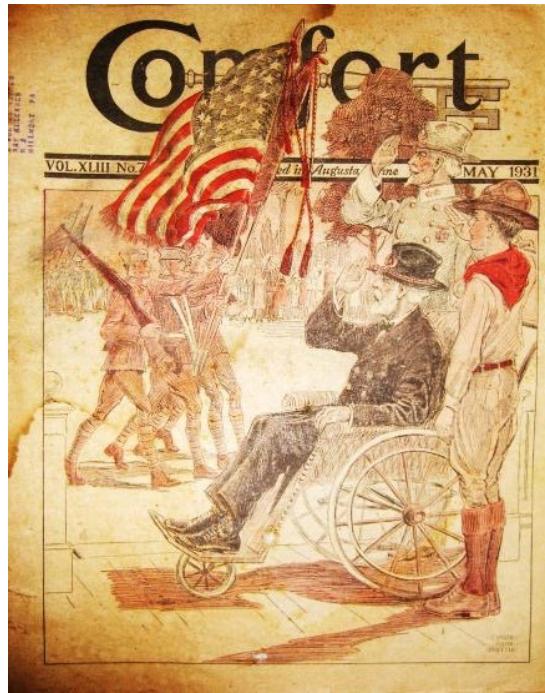


Edwin and future wife Meta pictured together in this 1918 photo from the PA State Fencibles.

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.



This interesting series begins with an unpublished WWI poster submission, dated 1917 (a James Montgomery Flagg entry apparently won this particular poster contest).

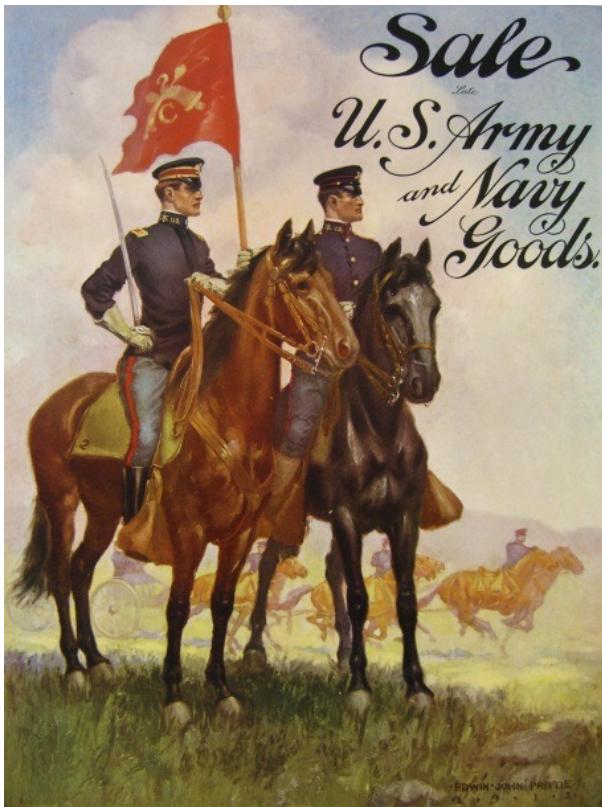


The artist's father (here, in GAR uniform) and the artist's son (in Boy Scout uniform), both Thomases, were represented in this *Comfort* cover, which also reprises the War Bonds poster.



In a 1919 piece, the similarities of the returning doughboys to the soldiers in the color guard poster are unmistakable, as is the artist's father on the right-hand border, holding a Civil War cap.

In a speech to the Philadelphia Society of Allied Arts in the 20s, 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." Prittie 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.



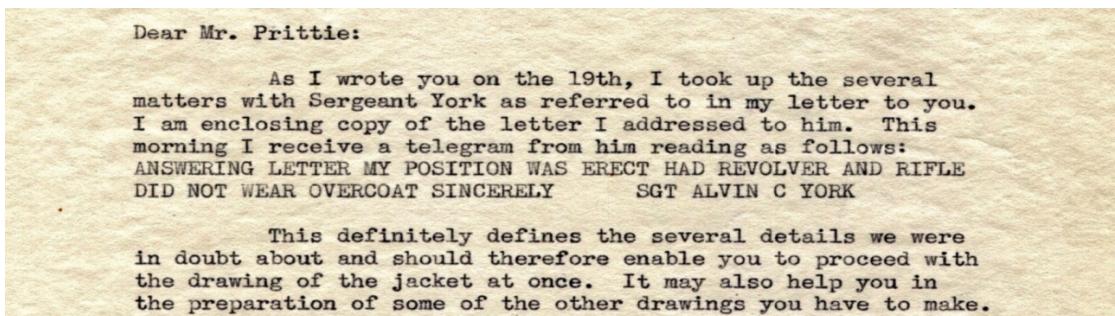
The details were easy for this painting, using himself as model for the near figure (or perhaps both figures).



One and only one stood his ground — Corporal Alvin York

Sgt. York was a farm boy from Tennessee who famously attacked German machine gun positions, single-handedly, during WWI.

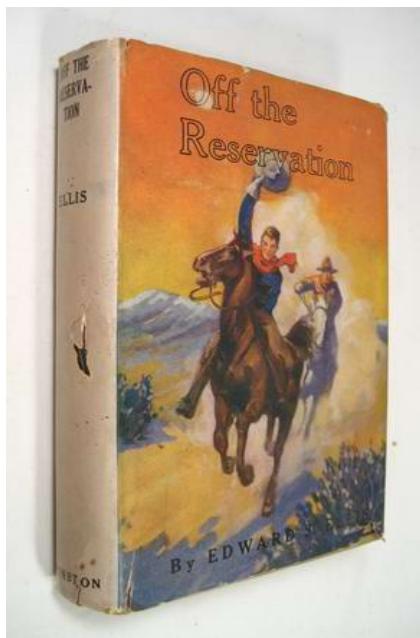
When EJP was illustrating Winston's, Sergeant York – the Last of the Long Hunters, he asked his publisher to seek some details from Sgt. Alvin York regarding the critical moments of the battle. York's response, as forwarded by the editor, is below; and the resulting illustration above.



John C. Winston Publishing Company:

Prittie began his lengthy freelance relationship with Winston (eventually Holt, Reinhardt 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.



Edward Ellis' "Off the Reservation" from the "Arizona Series".

In 1922 EJP illustrated Geo. Walsh's popular "Twilight Animal" (aka Bumper the Rabbit) series. The original publisher had used very primitive illustrations in the series. "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 4 new color plates for each of the eleven titles... These books are to be sold at a very low price." Prittie was offered (and accepted) \$850 for the 44 piece job.



"Bumper the White Rabbit"
approval sketch.



Finished "Bumper" plate.



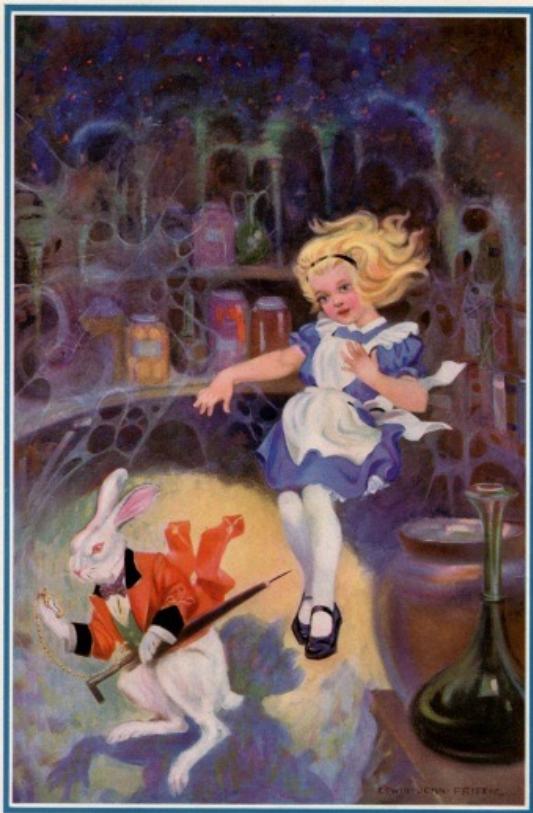
Buster the Brown Bear.

Throughout the 20s and 30s Prättie was the primary contributor of covers, interior plates, and ink drawings for Winston's "Classics Series". Among the other artists contributing to this series, are Frank Godwin and Frederick Richardson.

Winston Classics Illustrated by Prättie (listed chronologically):

- Mary Francis Story Book; Fryer 1921
- Alice in Wonderland 1923
- Robin Hood; Harvey 1923
- The Bible Stories Book; Fryer 1924
- Grimm's Fairy Tales 1924
- Story of a Bad Boy; Aldrich 1927
- Black Beauty; Sewell 1927
- The Little Lame Prince/Adventures of a Brownie; Mulock 1928
- Wings of Flame; Egan 1929
- The Nurnberg Stove; De La Ramee 1929
- Joan of Arc; Holmes 1930
- Gulliver's Travels 1930
- Betsy Ross – Quaker Rebel; 1932

Alice in Wonderland:

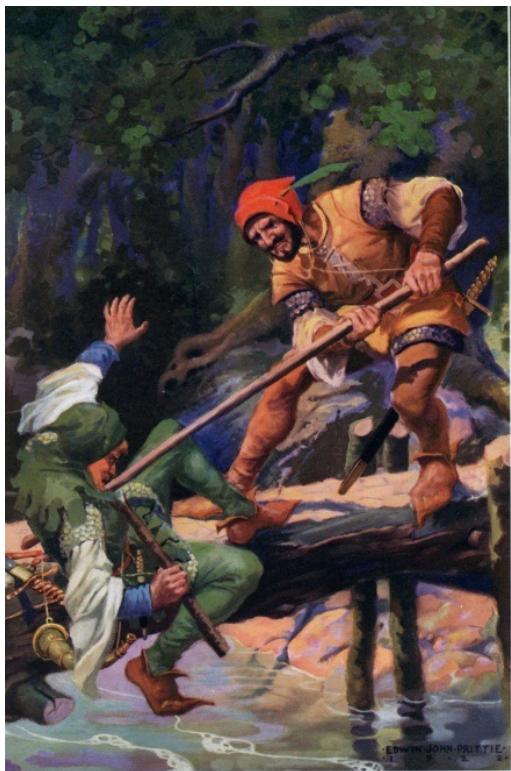


Frontispiece

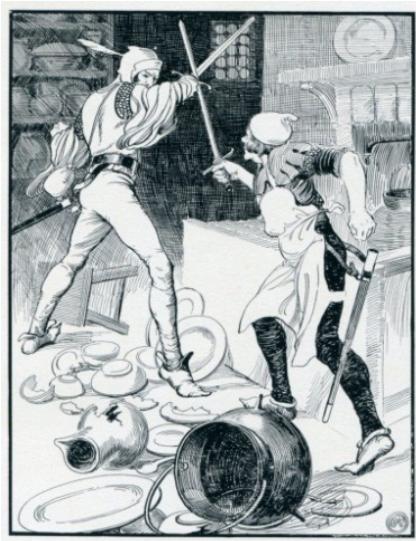
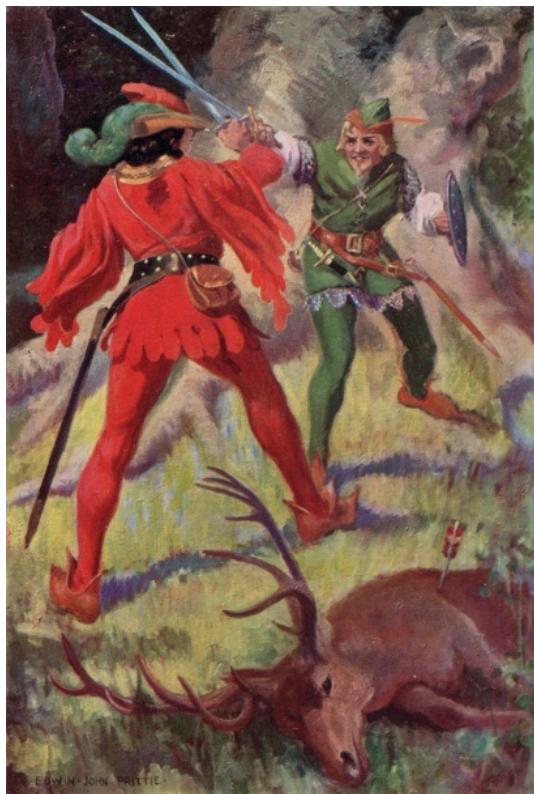


A hookah-smoking caterpillar

Robin Hood:



Frontispiece



Little Lame Prince:



Adventures of a
Brownie:



Frontispiece

Wings of Fire:



Frontispiece

Grimm's Fairytales:

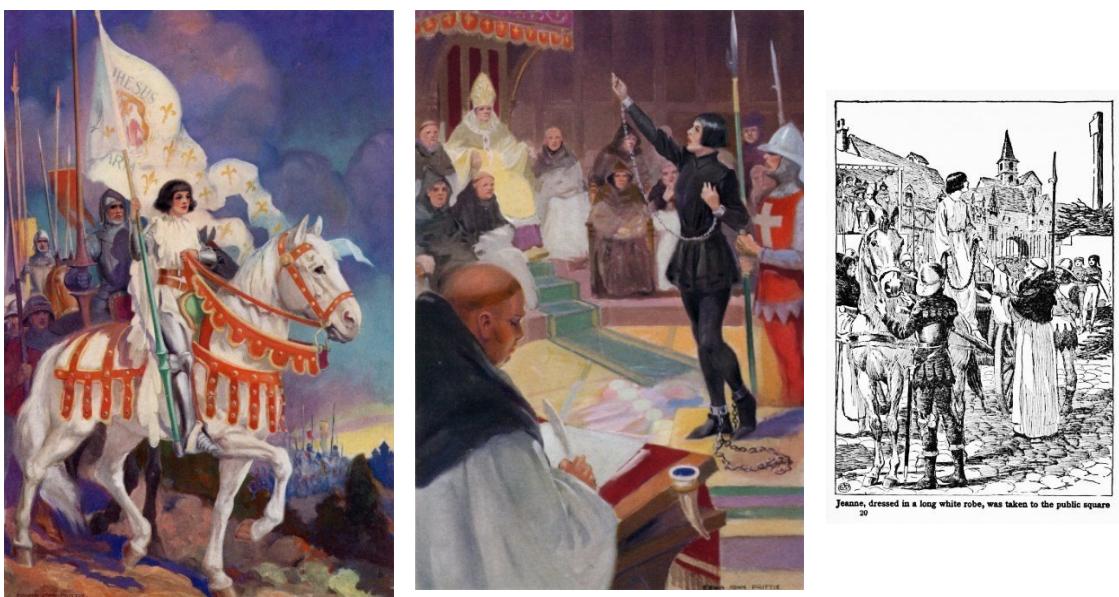


Black Beauty:



Frontispiece

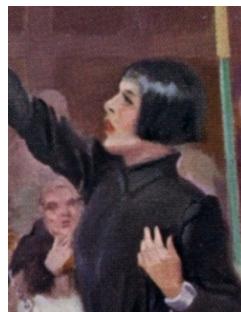
Joan of Arc:



Frontispiece



First plate: More Prittie

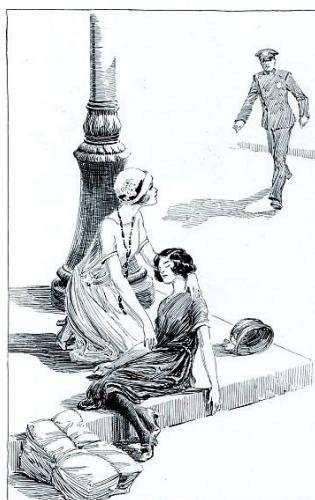


Final plate: Less Prittie

Author Mable Dodge Holmes expressed her thoughts to EJP after previewing the newly completed frontispiece. “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 stranger, 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!”

Comfort Magazines:

Prittie illustrated inside stories and later, covers, for Comfort magazine, published out of Augusta, Maine by the John Gannet Co. 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.



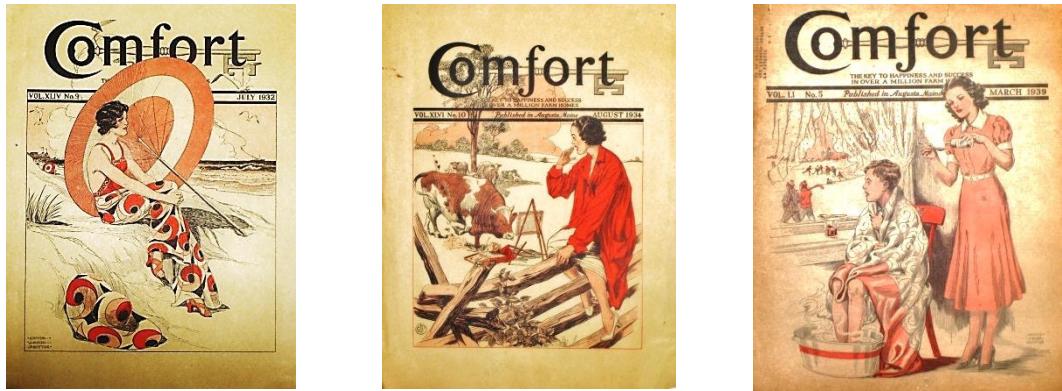
These 3 examples of pen and ink story illustration *may* be from Comfort Magazine, or may be from Good Stories, St. Nicholas, or various others magazines for whom Prittie illustrated between 1902 and 1930. They are good examples of the clean style, and energetic composition of the artist's pen and inks.

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 2-color press, using newsprint paper.



As these artist's proofs show, the 2-tone process actually required pen and ink drawing, not true painting or wash.

Comfort was popular with rural American 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.



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, did all the covers from 1929 to 1941. The magazine continued briefly without cover art, then ceased publication in 1942.



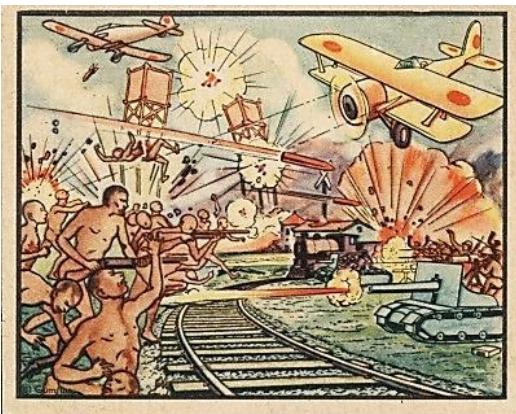
New Year's nod to Maxfield Parrish

Strangely, the 1939 movie, Wizard of Oz, was not even in pre-production in May 1938. Perhaps the subject of this piece is just a random farm girl practicing dancing before a big night out – but its similarities to Dorothy and the proximity of its date of publication are, at least, an intriguing coincidence.

Gum Inc. “War Gum Cards” and “Lone Ranger Cards” Series:

In 1938, Gum Inc., a Philadelphia-based chewing gum manufacturer founded in 1930 by J. Warren (Bubblegum) Bowman, put out of new series of trading cards called (and depicting) “The Horrors of War”. The slogan, “To know the horrors of war, is to want

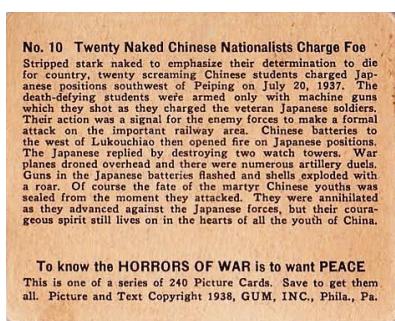
peace" was printed on the back of each card, along with a description of that card's particular horror.



Card #10 (Rear of card below)

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 Nan King" infamy, but also the Italo-Ethiopian War, and Spanish Civil War). The cards were hugely successful. In the last 48 cards of the series included depictions of Nazi Germany.

The cards were discussed in Life magazine for their propagandistic affect on the youth of the time, and even President Roosevelt used the cards in presentations to Congress when discussing the current event 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 grads who work as a team – assembly-line style. The initial cards were on the primitive side, and Bowman did not find the cards pleasing.



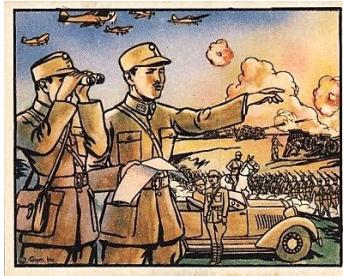
#14 Bomb kills passengers on Shanghai Trolley



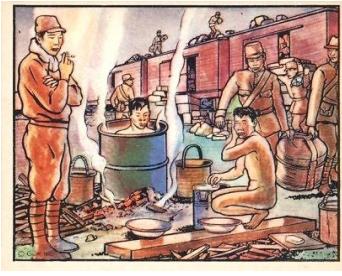
#40 [USS] Panay Machine Gunners Fight Back



#88 Human Hands Warn Newspaper Publishers

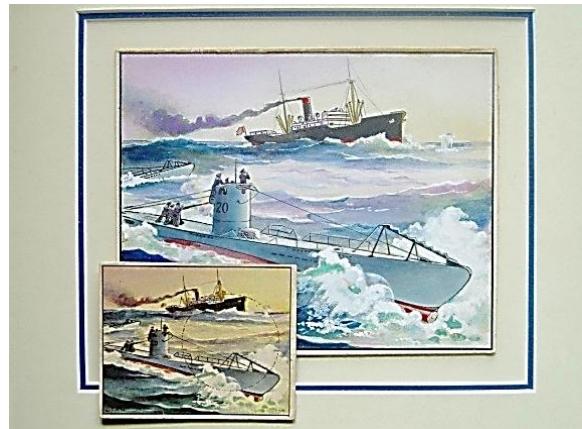
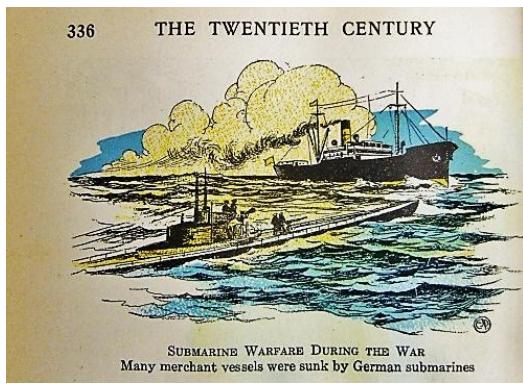


#131 Chiang Kai-Shek Commanding His Troops



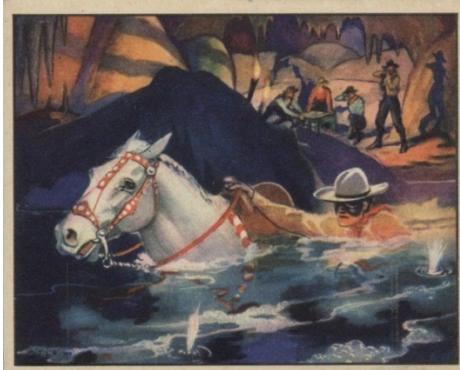
#149 "Delousing Party" Behind Japanese Lines

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, he would do the central themes with backgrounds filed 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 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".

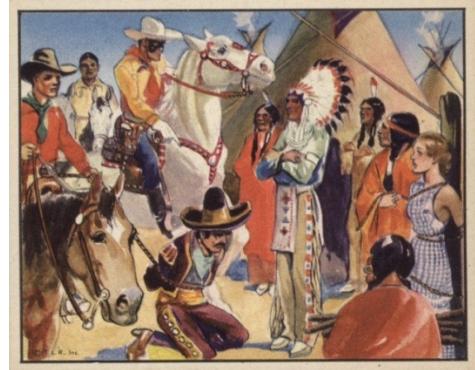


The company did numerous war related spin-offs of the original set. In this interesting example, from a 1939 series entitled War News Pictures (#50), Prittie apparently reprised his own textbook illustration of WWI German submarine activity [from Winston Co.; The Growth of Our Country; 1933]. The actual gum card can be seen beside the matted original 7½" x 9½" watercolor.

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 Remington influence).



#14 The Underground River



#40 A Piece of Gingham



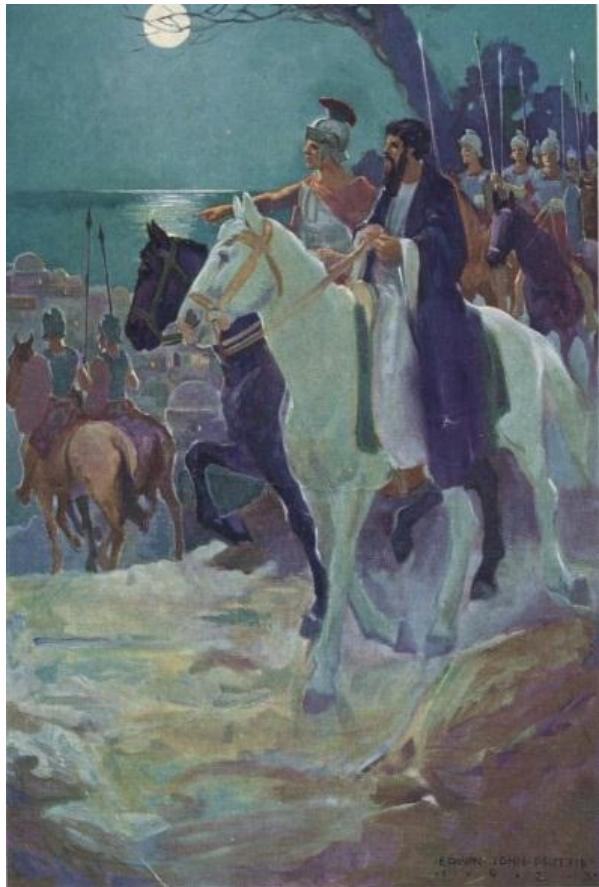
“The Lone Ranger Rescues Joan at the Pit” (from large-sized “premium” card)

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

Book of Life; John C. Rudin Co.; 1923:

EJP'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.

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.

Written by John L. Prittie, grandson of the subject, compiled from: original personal and historical documents belonging to the artist; and oral family history, of which the author attests, within that context, the accuracy.