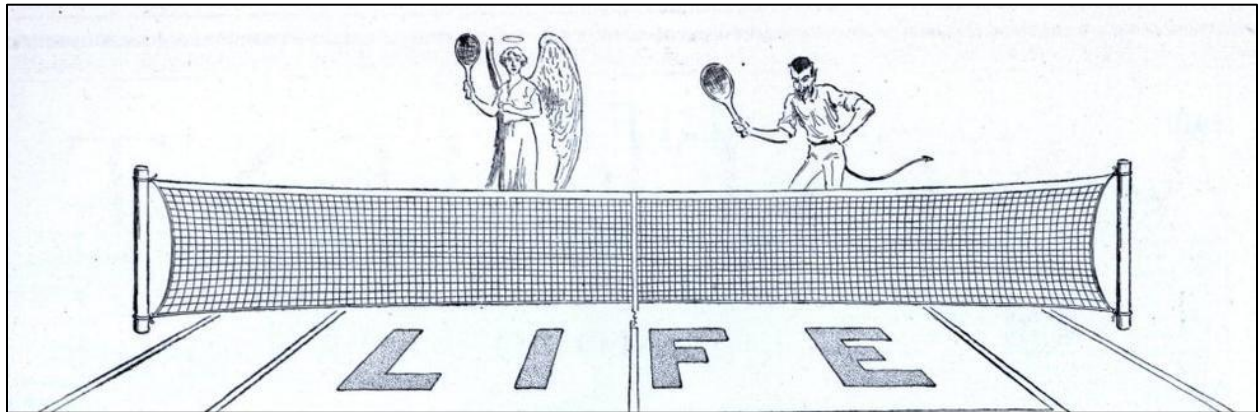


The Meaning of *Life*: A Microcosm of Social History

By Trail End State Historic Site Superintendent Cynde Georgen;
presented to the Sheridan County Historical Society, 2000

As a historian and someone who has often considered the topic, I've always wanted to give a talk about the meaning of life. Little did I know I would end up talking about the meaning of *Life Magazine* instead!



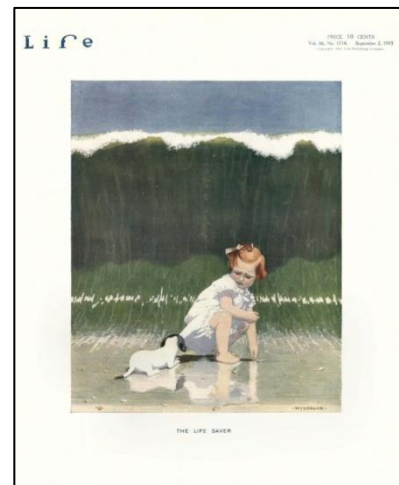
Detail from *Life Magazine*, 1915 (WSM Collection, TESHs)

BACKGROUND

Late in January, Trail End received a shipment of old periodicals that were being taken out of the collection at the Wyoming State Archives. Included were seven issues of *Life Magazine* ranging in date from September 1915 to September 1919. My curator and I sat thumbing through the magazines, exclaiming how this advertisement or that cartoon would be great for our upcoming exhibit on everyday life. To make a long story short, we decided to use these seven *Life* magazines as a springboard from which to examine life.

These magazines contain hundreds of popular jokes, short stories, cartoons and advertisements. Unlike the *Life Magazine* we knew from the 1940s to the 1960s, this version contained very few photographs (mostly just in advertisements). Instead, *Life* concentrated on illustrations - not unusual considering that its founder, John Ames Mitchell, was a New York cartoonist.

Begun in 1883 -the same year as *Ladies Home Journal* and *The Saturday Evening Post* - *Life* started out as a humor magazine.

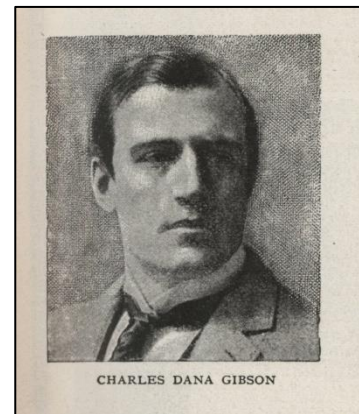


Similar to *Judge* and *Puck* magazines, *Life* was by far the most successful of the three; by 1916 it had a circulation of over 150,000, considered very good for those days.

Mitchell's magazine was described as being "of high artistic and literary merit," and indeed had higher standards for its drawings than the other magazines. The earliest of our seven issues shows a very good example of the quality of *Life's* covers. Dated September 2, 1915, the painting by an artist named Wildhack is entitled *The Life Saver*. With its little girl at the beach with a puppy, doesn't it remind you of the image later used by Coppertone suntan lotion?

CHARLES DANA GIBSON

Several popular American artists were featured in *Life*; in fact, one of America's best known illustrators was actually discovered by *Life*. In the September 2nd issue with the beach scene on the cover, John Ames Mitchell announced that from that date forward, the drawings of Charles Dana Gibson would be featured exclusively in the pages of *Life*. As you might remember, Gibson gained fame for his 1890s illustrations of beautiful young wasp-waisted women in leg-o-mutton sleeves and dark, elaborately coiffed hair. The look was so identified with the artist that anyone affecting it came to be known as a "Gibson Girl."



Gibson's first "Girl" had appeared in *Life Magazine* in 1890, and she was used for years to illustrate the magazine's short stories. Although he drew for *Colliers*, *Ladies Home Journal* and other magazines, Gibson maintained a strong loyalty for John Ames Mitchell - the man who had given him his first big break back in 1886. In 1915, after a ferocious bidding war, Gibson signed an exclusive contract with *Life*. After the death of Mitchell in 1918, Gibson became *Life's* art editor and later - in 1920 - he purchased the magazine that had given him his start.

Gibson's first exclusive piece for *Life Magazine* was a rather innocuous little study entitled "Tragic Moments ... Announcing Her Engagement." Later, however, Gibson tackled meatier subjects. Although the same Gibson style was evident - even with changes in hairstyles and fashion - the subject matter contained significantly less style and considerably more substance. One, entitled "When Women Vote: Mrs. Jones Is Officially Notified of Her Election as Sheriff," was published in 1916 and addressed women's increasing roles in politics and government (even though this was several years before women were given the right to vote). In the illustration, the only two males present are looking quite dejected by the turn of events.

A 1919 illustration called "After War Problems ... Entertaining An Ex-Red Cross Nurse," shows a young lady thinking about the excitement and challenges of her wartime experiences rather

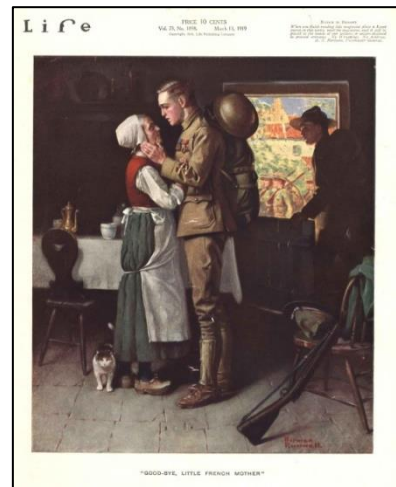
than concentrating on the words of the gentleman next to her. This was no doubt something that many women were doing after the war. It must have been very difficult for everyone - men and women - to go back to their old lives.

By the teens, Gibson was an established artist - actually the most influential artist in America and one who was copied by friend and foe alike. Another artist, however - one who began drawing his distinctive cover illustrations for *Life* as early as 1917 - would eventually achieve much wider acclaim than Gibson.

NORMAN ROCKWELL

Starting at age twenty-three, Norman Rockwell was a regular contributor to *Life* from the late teens through the late 1920s. He also provided illustrations for *Colliers*, *Leslie's*, *Literary Digest* and *Look* magazine. Of course, he is most known for his many *Saturday Evening Post* covers, creating 322 of them between 1916 and 1963.

In his illustrations, Rockwell tended to glorify or romanticize small, everyday events. City-born and bred, Rockwell nonetheless became known for his depictions of rural Americans. Naturally, many of his illustrations during these early years were scenes from World War One.



The cover piece, "My Mother," from December 1918 shows a clean-cut American soldier showing a photograph of his mother to an elderly woman in France or Belgium. Rockwell's attention to detail is impressive; in the soldier's left hand is an envelope addressed to him in care of the American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F). It is complete with the "passed by censor" stamp that appeared on all correspondence to and from the front.

A second Rockwell cover, "Good-bye Little French Mother," came out in April of 1919. The war was over and most of the troops were finally heading home. During the war, in the absence of their own families, many American soldiers allowed themselves to be informally "adopted" by French families - many of whom had lost their own sons earlier in the war.

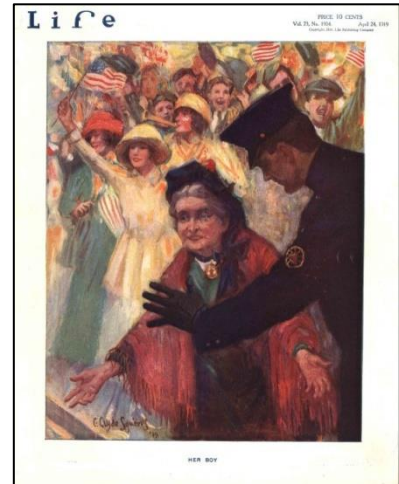
MORE FROM THE WAR YEARS

Three of our other covers also dealt with the war. The earliest, dated October 1916 and entitled "The Survivor," addresses the harsh cruelties of war. It shows a terrified horse swimming through the ocean, away from the flaming wreckage of a troop ship in the background. It's interesting that the artist chose to get his point across by using a horse rather than a terrified

soldier. This shows that although *Life* started out as a humor magazine, it wasn't shy of tackling more somber subjects.

Another cover deals with the joy of armistice and homecoming. Painted by C. Clyde Squires and published in April 1919, "Her Boy" shows the excitement of a mother welcoming her child home. Like Rockwell, Squires has a great eye for detail; the pin at the mother's throat contains a photo of her soldier son.

A third war-related cover commemorates General John J. Pershing's return from France in September 1919. "When Johnnie Comes Marching Home" suggests that by leading his troops to victory, Pershing has joined the elite brotherhood of heroic American war leaders including George Washington and Ulysses S. Grant. By that time, nearly all of the members of American Expeditionary Force had sailed home across the seas, as had most of the American occupying forces.



INSIDE THE COVERS OF LIFE

Life founder John Ames Mitchell - and later Charles Dana Gibson - crusaded for issues that they found to be of personal importance. Their artists were expected to illustrate along those lines. In our early copies, the European conflict was the main topic of discussion.

In 1915, two years before America entered the war, *Life* cartoons lambasted our nation's "head-in-the-sand" isolationism - despite threats from Asia to the west, Germany to the east, and Mexico to the south. As soon as war broke out in 1914, Mitchell and his staff demanded that America join the fray. The magazine's editorial policy never strayed from this position and many of the drawings during these years took on a very serious tone for a humor magazine.

William H. Walker's cartoon, "The Sailor's Prayer," shows two foundering ships; one representing the Democrats (captained by Woodrow Wilson), and the other representing the Republicans (occupied by presidential candidate Charles Evans Hughes). Each desperate sailor is praying that he has lived a righteous life and therefore might be deemed worthy enough to reach that Great White House in the Sky. Sitting behind Hughes is the little dachshund in a German helmet used by many political cartoonists to represent Germany. A former Supreme Court Justice, Hughes was frequently accused of being a German sympathizer who wanted America join the war on the side of the Kaiser.

POLITICS AS USUAL

By the time the war was over, *Life* began to focus on other issues, primarily high prices, labor disputes, the rise of Bolshevism, women's suffrage, prohibition and shortages of everything. Many shortages (and the resulting high prices) were brought about by continuous military demands and a profusion of labor strikes both during and after the war. The coal shortage was lampooned in R. A. Irvin's delightful illustration, "Bringing in the Lump of Coal." Instead of plum pudding, an apparently wealthy family is lucky enough to be piping in a shining lump of anthracite for its fireplace! The rich can afford to have coal, the cartoon implies, no matter how expensive it might be.

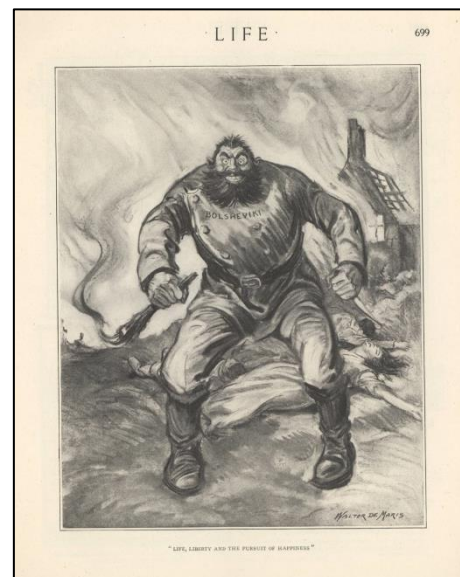
Reading these later issues of *Life*, you might wonder who would have dug up that coal, since apparently everyone was on strike. According to a 1919 Harry Grant Dart cartoon, everyone from trainmen and stevedores to paper hangers and grave diggers were on strike. In the cartoon, Business & Enterprise (as portrayed by a man in a suit at a train station) were unable to go towards Prosperity (a destination on the timetable) because the trains (Labor) weren't running. Congress (shown as a porter rifling through Business & Enterprise's luggage) was shown as being unable to do anything about the problem.

PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Once the Great War was over, American's had to find something new to worry about. They found the perfect target in Bolshevism. In Russian, the word Bolshevik means "one of the majority." In America, it took on an entirely different meaning: that of anyone interested in overthrowing the government.

The overthrow of the Russian government during the 1917 Revolution, combined with the rising swell of socialism and workers rights in the States, darkened the hearts of capitalists and patriots alike. In one Walter de Maris drawing (as in all the magazine's references to Bolsheviks), the villain is a dark, burly, uncouth monster; wild-eyed in his effort to take from others.

There was fear that the Bolsheviks' focus on oppressed workers would completely undo all the benefits of peace and economic stability and stir the American worker to revolt in the process. Even Charles Dana Gibson got caught up in the Red Scare. He captured the fear of Bolshevism and its outspoken proponents in "The Parlor Bolshevik," in which a man is shouting political



rhetoric at his fellow dinner guests. Everyone around him is either horrified, terrified or outraged; at either the man and his words, his scruffy appearance, or perhaps - knowing Gibson's penchant for tongue-in-cheek commentary - his appalling lack of manners exhibited by bringing up a serious issue during a social occasion.

Despite threats from abroad, *Life* was most concerned about what was happening here at home. Even before Prohibition took effect in 1920, many of *Life's* cartoons, stories and illustrations addressed its imminent arrival. Consistent with the views of its mostly upper-class readership, *Life Magazine* was quite vocal in its opposition to the "dry laws" adopted by individual states. In one illustration, "The Next Step in Prohibition," the artist suggests that after the certain prohibition of alcohol and the feared prohibition of tobacco, the reformers, next logical step would be the prohibition of relations between men and women.

DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

Many of *Life's* illustrations and cartoons dealt with society, manners, and the age-old war between the sexes. Even in the early 1900s, for example, women were making moves on their own and, as a result, irritating the men around them. In some cartoons, liberated women were portrayed as coarse, dishonest or grasping social climbers. Take for example:

- As drawn by Carl Anderson, two women in pants are sitting in a bar. One says to the other, "Take a drink and smoke a cigarette, Josie. Don't pay any attention to those silly promises you make to your fiancée ... I never do!"
- As executed by Paul Statt, a masked burglar examines a woman's vanity table covered with powders, dyes and creams. He exclaims, "Gee! Dere Ain't None Of Us Honest Dese Days!"
- As illustrated by Birch, a suitor - when asked by the mother if he can provide the daughter with all the luxuries and privileges enjoyed by the married women of her set - replies that yes, he "can give her town and country houses, motor cars, a string of polo ponies and dancing lessons at once ... and a divorce and alimony within two years."



Why the harsh view towards women? It's hard to say with only seven issues as a reference, but further research shows that the magazine had been providing such cartoons since at least the 1890s. In 1898, Charles Dana Gibson introduced a character named "Mr. Pipp," who was constantly being harangued by his strong-willed wife and spoiled daughters. The character

appeared for many years and, because he was so influential and so widely copied, it may be that Gibson inadvertently started this artistic form of “wife bashing.”

Although a man’s home may have been his castle, it was nonetheless run by the woman of the house - and there was apparently some resentment about this. Some cartoons portrayed the men as victims and their wives as oppressors. If one man was suffering, it probably made him feel better to see that others - even in cartoon form - were enduring the same. In one 1915 illustration, Gibson has a little girl saying to her uncle, “Between me and you, Uncle Jasper, don’t you get awful tired of doing what you’re told? Don’t be scared to answer ... I won’t give you away to Aunt Jane.”

The home had long been seen as the woman’s domain, not the business world. But during the years leading up to and including World War One, things were changing. Corsets were gone, families were smaller, skirts were shorter, incomes were higher and - at least while they were away at the front - there were jobs outside the home for married and single women alike. If, while her husband was away, a woman got used to making her own money and her own decisions, it was no doubt difficult to go back to a position of servitude. And, no doubt, it was difficult for the returning soldiers to adapt. Such humor as that contained in *Life Magazine* was probably a good source of relief.

Fortunately for women readers who appreciated good art and humor, *Life* was not just a men’s magazine. The artists poked as much fun at the male of the species as they did the female. One illustration by Walter Tittle addressed men who played the field and sowed too many wild oats before settling down. It portrays a cluelessly happy bride standing at the altar with a guilty-looking man. Throughout the sea of wedding guests are angry women, a few holding small children. It is entitled: “The Nervous Bridegroom When the Minister Asks if Anyone Knows a Reason Why This Couple Should Not Be Married.”

One final word on this topic: just so you don’t go away thinking that all the illustrators for *Life* magazine were a bunch of grumpy, hen-pecked misogynists - there was a sweet little illustration by Calvert in March of 1919, entitled “A Safe Landing Place,” in which a pilot has landed his plane next to his sweetheart’s house. Some women, it seems to say, are worth coming home to. And some men, the implication continued, were worth welcoming home.

NOW FOR A WORD FROM OUR SPONSOR

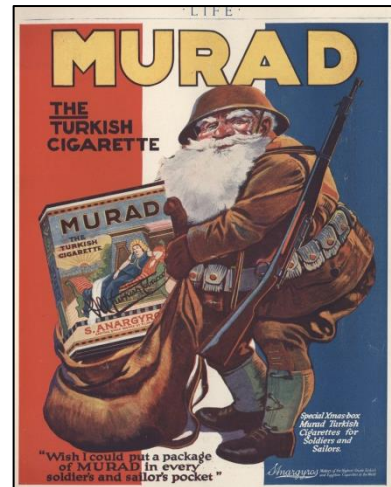
A study of vintage magazines, no matter how brief, wouldn’t be complete without a peek at the advertisements. Why? Because, according to *Life’s* Advertising Manager:

Advertisements are news. Good news - timely news - helpful news. News of the great world of business. Heralds of the world's improvements - builders of factories - makers of homes. News of the latest styles. News of comforts unknown when father was a boy. News that is handy to your eye. News that you can't afford to hurry by. News that will save you money. Don't miss the advertisements!

Cigarettes

The most prominent advertisers in our seven *Life* magazines are the tobacco companies and the automobile manufacturers. They're also some of the most expensive. Full-page color ads must have cost a pretty penny, even in 1919, but the magazines were full of them.

Smoking was very popular during the teens, and Egyptian and Turkish cigarettes were all the rage. If you invited friends over, you had to make sure that there were boxes of cigarettes in strategic locations throughout the house. Therefore, Ramses Cigarettes sold their smokes two ways: in packs of ten (costing twenty cents) or "weekend tins of 100."



Murad had a different approach. As you know from watching television, sex sells. And patriotism sells. And cute little Santas sell. In 1919, sex, Santa and patriotism sold cigarettes in the pages of *Life*. Scantly clad women were featured on packs of Murad Turkish Cigarettes proffered by a uniformed Santa Claus who wished that he could "put a package of Murad in every soldier's and sailor's pocket."

Automobiles

Most of the automobiles that were advertised in our *Life* magazines were made by companies that have long since disappeared. There were no Chevys, Fords or Chryslers. Instead, we have the Cole Motor Car Company of Indianapolis hawking an upper-crust car called the "Cole Aero-Eight Sportousine." Meanwhile, the Hupp Motor Car Company of Detroit was marketing their new family sedan, called the "Hupmobile." It was, the company boasted, "bound to become the super car of the American Family."

Like Hup and Cole, all the other auto manufacturers advertising in *Life* are now defunct, but their names intrigue us. Instead of a Subaru or Toyota, how would you like to drive a Chandler? Or an Apperson? How about a Mitchell or a Franklin? The one most familiar to us would probably be Willys-Overland; they later became famous for their jeeps.

According to the ads, these autos ranged in price from \$850 for a simple Studebaker roadster to ten times as much - \$8,500 - for a custom-designed Locomobile Limousine.

Other Ads

As for the rest of the advertisers, some of them are still around today: Columbia records, Goodyear tires, Nabisco snack foods, Perrier mineral water, Pepsodent toothpaste, Kodak film, Westinghouse appliances, AT&T phone service - even Lifesavers candies (although they were only available in four flavors back in the day).

One of the most interesting ads was a 1916 endorsement for Colt Revolvers. Rather than appealing to men, it was written for women - or for men who cared about their women. While horrified female onlookers gasp and reach for the phone to call the police, a school teacher relates her story:

He jumped from behind a tree and came toward me. He was powerful and desperate looking. The only thing that saved me was this Colt that brother Bert gave me when I took the school here. I thought then it was absurd to carry a pistol, but I will never again say that it is foolish for a woman to own a Colt.



Tapping into the fears of the single woman - that's a pretty interesting marketing approach for 1916. What's really interesting is that they portray the woman saving herself, not waiting for someone else to come along and protect her. Also, the ad plays to the prevalent fear of social unrest plaguing the country. The advertiser could have had the woman threatened by a snake or a wild dog, but they chose a human being instead.

THE CHANGE OF LIFE

Perhaps my favorite image from these seven *Life* magazines was drawn by an unidentified illustrator in 1915. Entitled "Abandoned," it is quite poignant and more than a little ambiguous. It shows an unfinished illustration of a woman wearing a red hat, stretching her arms imploringly toward the viewer. An artist's brush and tubes of paint are placed in front of it. There are no other details and no other words. What is it trying to tell us? Is it the loss of the

artist who has gone to fight abroad? The loss of the girl back home? Does it represent the myriad of work that would remain unfinished due to the effects of the war?

Some of the people I've shown it to think it indicates France, abandoned by America in its time of need. Or maybe it illustrates the loss of innocence. The magazine itself offers no explanation, so I cannot hope to do so. It just seems the perfect illustration of a moment in time when our nation was changing from a small rural nation to an industrialized superpower. Something had to be lost in the process.



It turns out that *Life* lost something in the process as well. After World War One, America's taste in reading material changed and the "genteel school of humor" was no longer in vogue. Comic magazines died out and were replaced by news magazines such as *Time* and *Fortune*. Under the ownership of Charles Dana Gibson, *Life* struggled on as a weekly magazine until 1932 at which time it was sold and turned into a monthly. In 1936, *Life* was acquired by Time Magazine and transformed into a weekly showcase for the best in American photojournalism. When *Life* reappeared on November 23, 1936, only the name remained the same.

Trail End's seven issues of *Life Magazine* have provided us with an excellent window into days gone by. They've clued us in not only to products, politics and attitudes, but to fashion, home decorating and personal style as well. This was just a little slice of *Life*. If you'd like to see the whole pie, stop by the Trail End State Historic Site; we can bring the magazines out for you to look at.

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