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JAZZ-AGE CARTOONERY

John Held, Jr., and the *New Yorker*

By Glen Nelson

IN THE 11 APRIL 1925 ISSUE OF THE *NEW YORKER*—seven weeks after that magazine began publication—an image titled “The Rumrunner’s Sister-in-law” appeared. It was drawn by John Held, Jr., a Mormon.

Over the next eight years, 125 of Held’s cartoons appeared in the pages of the *New Yorker*. Being more or less the official illustrator of the Jazz Age, Held’s work could be found just about everywhere in those days. He regularly contributed covers and cartoons to books and to the era’s most popular magazines: *Life*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *House and Garden*, and *Redbook*.

Most of Held’s images abound with budding youth, vivacious 1920’s fashion, and colorful urban chic. His cartoons for the *New Yorker*, on the other hand, take the form of etchings and woodcuts, looking like throwbacks to a much earlier age. Held’s Mormonness peeks out of these peculiar *New Yorker* cartoons in ways that aren’t apparent in his other work. They evoke a very Mormon view of America’s shifting morals and the consequences of vice. How did these images find their way into the *New Yorker*, of all places?

Held was something of a prodigy. He sold his first cartoon at the age of nine, and at 15 sold one to *Life* magazine. Then at 16 he landed a job at the *Salt Lake Tribune* as a sports cartoonist. Held proudly maintained throughout his life that he had no formal art training and that he had only two

teachers—his father and Mahonri Young, who also worked at the *Tribune* until he moved to New York City where he took a generation of Mormon artists under his wing.

Held’s father, Switzerland-born John Held, Sr. was also an artist. An early Mormon educator named John R. Park discovered him while travelling through Europe in search of talent. Park legally adopted Held, Sr., brought him to Salt Lake City, and groomed him to teach art at Deseret University, a position Held, Sr. declined. Instead, he started a successful career as a local illustrator and engraver, contributing illustrations to George Reynolds’s 1888 *The Story of the Book of Mormon*.

Looking at a few of the cartoons Held, Jr. did for the *New Yorker*, one first notes their upright tone. They illustrate the consequences of contemporary vices—gambling, drinking, smoking, and womanizing—in the stylistic guise of Victoriana. “The Drunkar’s Wife” (19 December 1925) shows a woman nervously taking a mantle clock to a pawn broker in the middle of the night. This tone is a sharp contrast to the other *New Yorker* cartoonists of the era—notably Peter Arno, William Steig,

and James Thurber—who cheerfully embraced the Prohibition-bashing, sexually adventurous era of the 1920s and early 30s.

Held’s cartoons had titles such as “The Fate of the Cigarette Fiend” (28 November 1925), “The Wayward Son” (27 March 1926), and “She’s Only a Lassie Who Ventured on Life’s Stormy Path Ill-Advised” (28 July 1928).

But Held was a humorist first, his pictorial melodramas showing just enough cheek to allow the reader some ethical wiggle room. It’s doubtful that turn-of-the-century Sunday school teachers, even Mormon ones, lectured on the utility of



WHAT DO YOU MEAN A TWOTIME MAN? SAID BRIGHAM YOUNG



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The RUMRUNNER'S
SISTER-IN-LAW

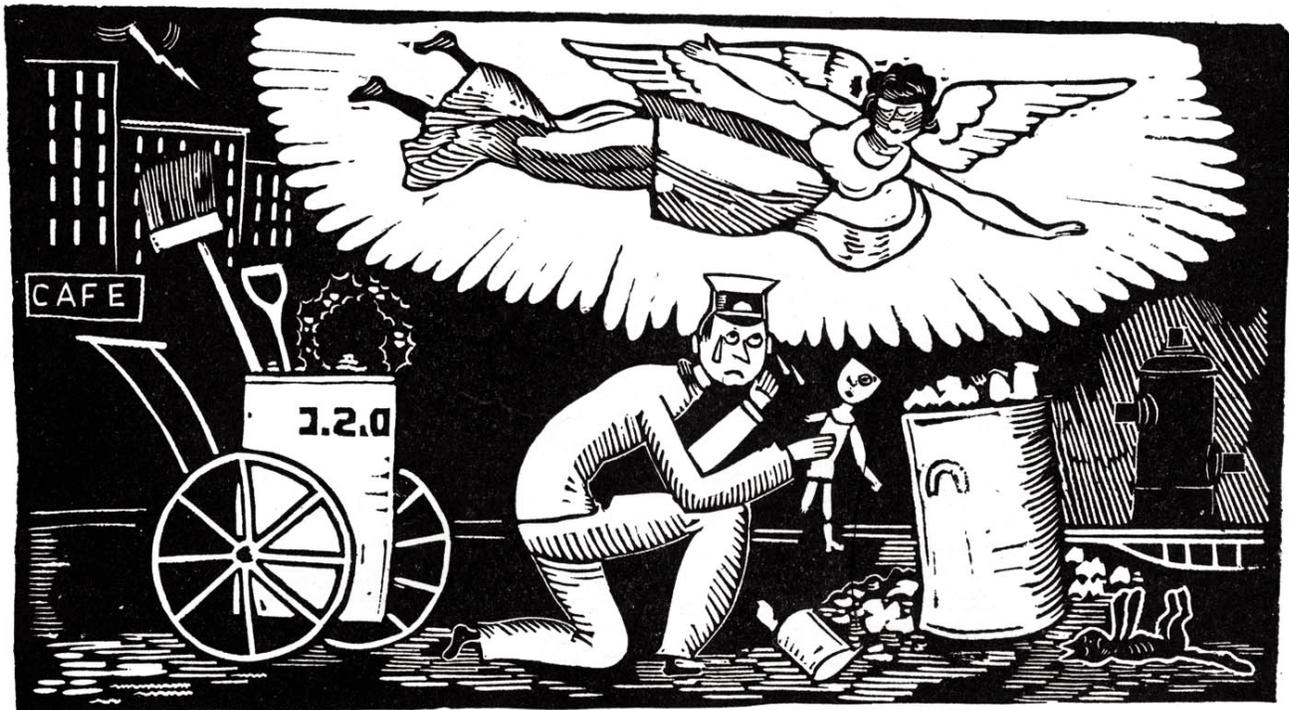
ENGRAVED BY JOHN HELD JR

a hat pin in the defense of womanly virtue, as Held's 8 February 1930 cartoon illustrates. Still, there is no denying that his background informs the cartoons with a certain ethical air and sensitivity to the victims of moral wrongdoing—destitute wives of alcoholics aren't particularly funny, after all.

Held sometimes even slipped LDS imagery into his cartoons. A ZCMI store sign hovers in the background of "The Subtle Usage of the Clove" (20 June 1931), and the Salt Lake Temple and Tabernacle stand behind Brigham Young in "What Do You Mean a Two Time Man? Said Brigham Young" (23 January 1926). In "The Street Sweeper's Christmas" (12 December 1925), an angel appears to a crying sanitation agent rummaging through garbage for a toy. The angel is a riff on the Nauvoo Temple's 1846 angel Moroni.

How did Held sneak all of these cartoons past the magazine's editors? Was he trying to pull a fast one? Quite the opposite. The legendary founder and first editor of the *New Yorker*, Harold Ross, was fully in on the joke. Ross's family had moved to Salt Lake City when he was seven, where he became Held's high school classmate.

Unfortunately, Held's life hit the skids in the 1920s. He lost his considerable wealth during the Great Depression, victim of a fraud scheme, and consequently suffered a nervous breakdown. By 1932, the Jazz Age was over, America had a hangover, and Held was finished drawing *New Yorker* cartoons, his last appearing in the 17 September issue of that year. He moved to Wall, New Jersey, in 1945; spent the remainder of his life on a dairy farm, occasionally publishing a cartoon; and died of throat cancer in 1958.



The STREET SWEEPER'S CHRISTMAS
A LOVELY ENGRAVING BY JOHN HELD JR