

This Day in History... January 17, 1929

Popeye's Comic Debut

On January 17, 1929, Popeye the Sailor Man first appeared in the *Thimble Theatre* comic strip.

Cartoonist Elzie Crisler Segar created Popeye. Segar worked as a film projectionist before taking a correspondence course to become an illustrator.

After moving to Chicago, Segar met Richard F. Outcault, creator of *The Yellow Kid*. Outcault encouraged Segar to pursue his dream and helped him find work with the *Chicago Herald*. Segar published his first comic, *Charlie Chaplin's Comedy Capers*, in March 1916. Over the next few years, he continued to create comics for the *Herald* as well as other papers.

In 1919 Segar moved to New York to work for King Features Syndicate. It was there that he created *Thimble Theatre* for the *New York Journal*, debuting on December 19, 1919. This strip revolved around the spinsterish Olive Oyl and her brother Castor. For the next decade, Segar continued to develop *Thimble Theatre* as well as a few other comic strips.

Then in January 1929, Segar needed to create a mariner character to navigate Castor Oyl's ship to Dice Island. That mariner was Popeye and he was introduced in the January 17, 1929, strip. When asked if he was a sailor, Popeye's first line was "Ja think I'm a cowboy?"

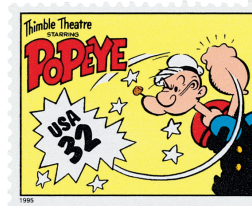
Though Popeye was an instant hit with readers, Segar wrote him out of the strip. When fans complained, Popeye returned and eventually became the star. In fact, *Thimble Theatre* quickly became one of King Features' most popular comic strips in the 1930s. As a result, it was expanded to appear in many more newspapers around the country.

Segar enjoyed his newfound success, making \$400,000 a year by 1936. However, just two years later he died of Leukemia and liver disease at only 43 years old. After Segar's death, a number of artists carried on his legacy, with the comic strip still appearing in newspapers today.

Popeye has also appeared in a number of other mediums. Fleischer Studios first animated him in 1933. The cartoons made Popeye even more popular, and in 1938 a poll revealed that Popeye was the most popular cartoon character in Hollywood. Over the next several decades, Popeye starred in a variety of different cartoons, all the way up to the early 2000s.

Popeye also had his own comic books, radio program, games, and a live-action movie starring Robin Williams. Interestingly, the 1981 arcade game *Donkey Kong* was originally planned to be a Popeye game, but the game's creators were unable to work out a deal to license the characters. But when that game proved popular, Popeye's license holders reconsidered and allowed a game to be made.

And the salty sailor was so popular that Texas spinach growers erected a statue in his honor, claiming his endorsement saved their business during the dark days of the Great Depression.



From the Comic Strip Classics issue.

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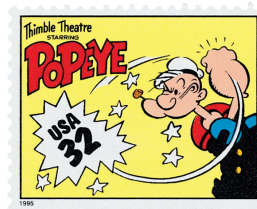
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