Nine

"What Kind of Pen Do You Use?"

The tools of the cartoonist's trade have changed dramatically over the years—though never so much as in the past decade or so. We older cartoonists pursued what seemed an impossible dream for many years. We longed for the perfect tool, technique, or combination thereof that would give us:

1) Mobility—to be able to draw anywhere, at any time.

2) Speed—to meet deadlines.

3) Convenience—no messy brushes, bottles of indelible india ink, or pens to haul around.

4) The Right Touch—the drawing tool had to "feel" right. Some of us are painterly artists, some are line artists; some of us produce loose sketches and drawings, while others prefer a more tightly controlled, "finished" look.

5) Quick and easy delivery—getting original artwork to an art department on time usually meant working in the office, but the nature of the job sometimes made it difficult to keep normal office hours. Even if we were on location at a news event, such as a political party convention or a bowl game involving a local college team, we still needed to be able to transport sketches to the newspaper as quickly as possible.

6) Reproduction value—the cartoon had to look good when printed.

There were no perfect solutions then, and the tools we used varied widely. Especially before computers, the drawing implements and methods we used to create our cartoons were so personal, of such immense variety, and so critical to our jobs that "What kind of pen do you use?" became a ritual question we cartoonists posed to one another regularly in our quest for cartooning enlightenment. If we admired someone's work, we naturally wanted to incorporate its admirable qualities—its rough style or smooth elegance—into our own. Cartoonists' conventions were yearly show-and-tell sessions: every one of us had his or her favorite drawing implement, but no one had the *perfect* drawing implement. Personally, I've always preferred doing my art in pencil, but pencil lines were not black enough or thick enough to reproduce properly back then. There were many different kinds of pens—as well as other tools—but each had its own limitations. We all longed for *the* Perfect Solution—the tool, medium, or technique that would end our search forever.

Our work combined the problems of graphic artists and columnists—a weird hybrid. Those daily deadlines required speed, and the limitations of newsprint reproduction at that time dictated that we work—for the most part—in black-and-white.

Even today, some cartoonists still use india ink and drawing pens with removable and interchangeable steel nibs. The artist can produce broad or fine lines with the same implement simply by changing the pressure or angle of the pen—which sounds easy, but it isn't. Working with india ink, of course, has its own disadvantages. It isn't very portable, and you're always having to worry about knocking ink jars over. India ink is very black—and indelible. Once you spill a drop of it on an article of clothing, that garment is ruined. We artists got into the habit of wearing cheap or old clothing almost all the time—which was probably not good for our status as pro-

For this cartoon (which I drew in 1980), I used a watercolor brush dipped in india ink.

fessionals in the office, but most of us were not paid enough to keep replacing our wardrobes. (It still pains me to buy clothes anywhere except large discount chains that keep their prices down by using child labor in foreign countries. I'm trying to break that habit.)

Improvements in newsprint reproduction capabilities in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s gave cartoonists greater freedom to experiment with materials. Some still used the older methods, as I mentioned—but with a lighter touch.

Tools like felt-tip markers looked promising for a while. They laid down a solid, heavy black line that covered well; they were more portable than india ink or the special, hard-to-find varieties of paper we sometimes used to enhance our cartoons (more on those later); and they came in a variety of sizes. There was one problem with them, though—and it was insurmountable. They bled through "Liquid Paper" or whatever other correction material we used, no matter how many layers we used. That was the kiss of death for the permanent felt-tip marker, because there is not a cartoonist in the world who doesn't make mistakes. In fact, if you have bought an "original" cartoon from the 1940s through the 1980s and it is *not* covered in correction fluid and/or blue pencil markings, you may want to have it checked out. (Though some cartoonists did transfer their preliminary drawings to art paper by tracing them using a light table.)

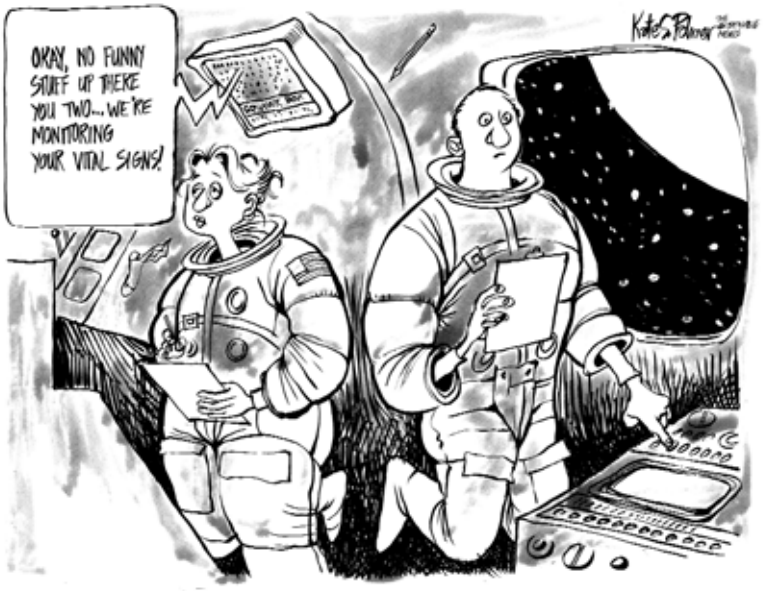
Many cartoonists have tried—and some have discarded—engineering pens. The only ones available to me were called Rapidographs, and most cartoonists of my generation have probably used them at one time or another. The points of these pens are hollow tubes. A thin wire inside the tube delivers that very black india ink—but you have to be careful. Some of those pen points are very fine, and it's easy to stab yourself, leaving a small black mark that will be with you forever. I don't know why it never occurred to me to actually give myself a real tattoo—a discrete butterfly or something somewhere. But tattoos weren't popular then, except for WWII navy veterans and prisoners who tattooed their knuckles. Also, those things *hurt*.

I used an engineering pen for this 1981 cartoon about the sad state of air traffic control at our nation's airports.

Engineering pens come with a variety of nib (or point) sizes, and an entire set is very expensive. They store the india ink (which is too thick and too fast-drying to be used in regular or fountain pens) in refillable reservoirs, so you don't have to keep dipping them. This makes them more portable than old-style drawing pens or brushes, which require frequent dipping. Engineering pens can be used on practically any type of paper, but the drawback is that the lines they make are too uniform. To achieve any variety in the width of the lines, one must either thicken thin lines by tracing over them repeatedly, or else change nibs a lot. The most frustrating thing about engineering pens is that they must be babied if they are to continue working properly. Engineering pens that are not cleaned regularly and stored carefully soon require a lot of shaking and cursing before they'll deliver ink—and then it's likely to be a great glob of black just on the most delicate area of the drawing.

One new tool that was all the rage at one cartoonist's convention was the sponge-tip brush-marker. The ink is black enough (for a while), and it acts enough like a brush to satisfy those of us who value portability over style. But I've had a hard time finding them, and the ink doesn't flow thickly for long enough. The lines soon become an unsatisfactory gray as you use the pen. It takes two or three of these brush-marker pens for one large cartoon. If you work smaller, you might be able to get three or four cartoons out of one pen—*if* you remember to recap it tightly each time you use it.

Patterns of lines or dots were the closest we could come to achieving shades of gray. In order to avoid the tedious process of crosshatching or stippling in shadows and subtle contrasts by hand, we often reached for various shortcut solutions. Many cartoonists became addicted to Grafix paper, a unique product that—I am not kidding—can only be found in Cleveland, Ohio. Once the cartoonist has drawn and inked his cartoon on the Grafix paper and erased any pencil marks, he uses a watercolor brush to apply a clear liquid developer (which comes with the paper) to the areas where gray is needed. Like magic, a textured pattern appears. The pattern may consist of fine lines, heavy lines, crisscrossing (or crosshatched) lines, or speckles, depending on what type of Grafix paper the cartoonist has ordered from the company. If used correctly (and blotted carefully), the paper does a nice job of approximating gray or shadows. I never could get the hang of it, though. I always used too much developer—and then forgot to blot it, so my originals wound up all dark brown and messy.



An example of the Grafix paper effect, circa 1977.
(I did the line art with a watercolor brush dipped in inda ink.)

Just recently, our cartoonists' online forum went berserk when they discovered that the company in Ohio was going to stop producing Grafix paper. One cartoonist actually called the company to make sure. They told him that the press they'd been using to produce the paper was so old and worn out that it couldn't be fixed. Cartoonists all over the country are now busily hoarding the stuff. (Well, those who still have *jobs* are hoarding it.) That led other cartoonists to reminisce about the old days of Zipatone, Amberlith, and Rubylith.

Amberlith, Rubylith, and Zipatone are the trade names for overlays we sometimes used instead of Grafix paper to create grays or solid areas in our cartoons. These overlays consist of two layers. The first layer is a thick, clear sheet of acetate. That is covered by a thin, self-stick second layer of cellophane imprinted with patterns of lines or dots—or, in the case of Amberlith and Rubylith, solid color. Though really intended for use in schematic drawings, the overlays worked for cartoons too—but the work was tedious. First, the cartoonist had to *very carefully* line up register marks on the overlay with corresponding marks on the cartoon. If the marks didn't line up exactly, the pattern would appear in the wrong place. Then—after carefully taping everything down—the cartoonist, with a sharp blade and a steady hand, cut through the *top layer only*, peeling it away wherever no pattern was needed. When the cartoon was printed, the pattern would appear only in strategic areas. Many cartoonists and graphic artists used overlays—and many of us have suffered repeated accidental stab-wounds from the sharp, pointed X-acto blades we used. Rapidograph tattoos and X-acto scars: we old-timers wear them proudly.

Still, we had it a whole lot easier than nineteenth-century cartoonists like Thomas Nast, who had to draw their work backwards on a block of wood, then get an engraver to carve it out. Some artists doubled as their own engravers. Typesetters had to assemble individual book and newspaper pages by hand, arranging the text around engraved image blocks using lead slugs stamped with letters, numbers, and punctuation. By the summer of 1965, when I worked my first newspaper job as a proofreader for Orangeburg's *Times and Democrat*, the printing process had become both faster and more efficient. Machines did the most tedious typesetting work, and art reproduction capabilities had improved dramatically. I worked odd hours—from 7 p.m. to 3 a.m. One of the teachers from my high school had a second job there, and he drove me home after work. I don't think Mama would have let me work those hours if he hadn't been there. As for me, it was nice to know he was out front in the newsroom. I worked in the back, where they composed the pages and where the big printing press turned huge rolls of newsprint into newspapers. I loved to watch the photographs come rolling in from the wire services on a machine that turned smooth metal plates into photos just by carving parallel lines. In the darker areas of the photos, the lines were thick, while the lighter parts were made up of thinner lines; there was very little, if any, solid black. The end product was a machine-carved engraving of a photograph that then went to the page composer, who fitted it in among the metal letters that made the words.

The Times and Democrat had two wire service machines—AP and UPI, I think—which clattered to life whenever a statewide, national, or international story came in. Those machines spewed out an inch-wide yellow tape dotted with an indecipherable pattern of perforated holes. The editors were somehow able to read the holes, moving the tape through their fingers as they studied the contents. When they found a story they wanted to use, they took that tape to a linotype machine operator in the composing room (where I worked). The operator then fed it into the machine. Somehow, the holes in the tape instructed that machine to produce the necessary letters and characters for the story from molten lead supplied by the linotype operator. With much noise and commotion—and faster than the eye could follow—the machine spelled out the story in lead slugs, which it lined up in sequence on a metal tray. The linotype operator then took the tray of words over to the guy who composed the pages. The composer put the page together—words, pictures, everything. And every bit of it was metal, a mirror image of the printed

page: the composer had to be able to read backwards.

Once the composer had completed the page to his satisfaction, it was inked, and a copy was made for me to proofread. I liked to read, but I was a lousy proofreader. Nothing ever looks wrong to a person who cannot spell. (Lucky for me, they didn't realize how truly incompetent I was until it was time for me to get back to school anyway.) But once I had given my OK, the composed page went into the pressroom. After the metal image of the page had been used, the slugs that made up the words were dumped back into a washing-machine-sized vat of burping molten lead to be turned into silver lava, ready for another page. My desk was located right between the vat of molten lead and the huge open doorway that led to the pressroom. The three or four linotype machines behind me made a deafening racket that, combined with the din of that press when they cranked it up, created a not-unpleasant hypnotic cacophony.

In the decade between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, printing methods changed drastically. When I started working at *The Greenville News* in 1975, the paper had just switched over to photoengraving and offset printing. The new photoengraving process, in which an image was chemically etched into a metal plate (as opposed to being carved into the surface), was far superior to previous engraving techniques and could produce images of greater detail and quality than ever before. Cartoonists went nuts. Suddenly, we could cram our cartoons full of all kinds of detail using finer brush or pen lines—and it would all reproduce! Sometimes our cartoons were *too* full of detail, and our editors had to rein us in. But our art did take on more personality because we were free to use a greater variety of drawing tools.

Before the advent of the dry paper copier, however, many cartoonists were at the mercy of the folks in the engraving room for extra copies of their cartoons. These copies were called "Velox prints" or "Veloxes." The engravers at our paper, who were perpetually engaged in labor disputes with the management (South Carolina has never been friendly to unions of any kind), liked to demonstrate their indispensability by making it almost impossible to obtain their services. My editors informed me that I was "management"—even if I didn't want to be—and refused to let me talk to the engravers. Surly and suspicious, the engravers groused about the extra work and questioned every request for Veloxes of my cartoons. It was enough of a hassle just to get extras for my own records, let alone fulfill the requests for reprints that trickled in every now and then, or for copies to enter into awards competitions.

The day I discovered a large, new dry paper copier in our executive offices marks a huge milestone in my cartooning career. I still remember staring in wonder at the perfect reproduction of my art—on regular, normal paper! Suddenly, I could get good, clear, black-and-white copies of each cartoon—and I could have as many as fifteen if I wanted! (I was afraid to ask for more—I didn't want to be noticed by someone who would not approve of my use of the machine in the Multimedia Executive offices, and I didn't want to get the person who had introduced me to the copier in trouble.) Finally, I was able to send work to syndicates for their consideration. When the Field Newspaper Syndicate (now North America Syndicate, unless they've changed the name again) began to distribute my cartoons in 1980, I simply mailed my cartoon each day to California. My work had been syndicated for nearly four years by the time I resigned from *The Greenville News*, and I still had syndicate obligations to fulfill, so Jim and I bought a dry paper copier for our home. It cost as much as a small car and we had to endure three years of payments, but it kept me in business.

I have always been impatient for technology to catch up with me, probably because I don't like to spend much time on one piece of art. I like to do the work, finish it quickly, see it reproduced to my satisfaction, and start on another right away. (Oddly, in between the time I handed the art over to the editorial assistant in Greenville and the time I pulled into my driveway at home, I would completely forget that day's cartoon. Jim would ask, but I could never remember. This

amnesia would last until I saw it the next morning in the paper. Other cartoonists have said that the same thing happens to them.) Until modern computers and the Internet came along, I hated almost everything I produced. I was either dissatisfied with the drawing, disdainful of my weak attempt at an opinion, or disappointed at the poor reproduction.

Only in the past five years—long after I began working on this book—has publishing "gone digital" in a big way. Advances in computer hardware and software and the ease of access to the Internet have given cartoonists more effective ways to produce and deliver our art. We can literally draw our cartoons with the computer now—or draw on paper in any medium, in any color, and scan our drawings into the computer. We can make corrections and adjust the scanned art to be as dark or as light as we want; we can even add or remove color as we please, producing a full-color, monochrome, grayscale, or plain black-and-white image—all from the same sketch. A growing number of cartoonists no longer even produce originals. Everything is digital. This does not mean, of course, that computer cartoons all look alike. The results are as varied as they ever were—even more so, I believe, now that there are more choices.

Today's large external hard drives, DVD recorders, and various other electronic storage media make it possible to store almost limitless quantities of the art we create digitally, and we can now deliver our art to clients almost instantaneously via e-mail or websites. Getting artwork done and ready to print is easier today than ever before—and printing technologies have improved, too. Today's printers are very fast and accurate and can reproduce thousands of gray tones and colors. Even with all these improvements, though, art is still reproduced using dots—only now the dots are called pixels.

At today's conventions, we are more likely to pester each other with such questions as: "What software do you use?" "Do you have a Mac or a PC?" "Do you have a pen tablet?" "What size tablet should I get?" "What format do you use to save your work—TIFF? JPEG? Bitmap? Photoshop?" "Do you scan at 300 or 600 dpi? How about 1200?" "What sort of data storage do you use—DVD disks? An external hard drive? A web site?" "How can I preserve the darkest, crispest lines?" "What are your thoughts on grayscale? What about color?" "What kind of compression do you use for emailing pictures, and what is the best way to get my high-resolution files to customers?"

And . . . "What kind of pen do you use?"