

Thirteen



Fourth and Long—Time to Punt

When you think about it, my career dreams were perhaps just a trifle grandiose. There I was, working in Greenville, South Carolina, and planning to be the first woman ever to win the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning. In 1980, to my mind, that didn't seem so far out of reach. After all, there were only three full-time women editorial cartoonists in all of North America—and only two of us were nationally syndicated. I figured that sooner or later the Pulitzer people were bound to cave to the pressures of the times and give the prize to one of us—like NASA finally sending a woman astronaut into space, or Reagan finally appointing a woman to the Supreme Court.

I figured I had a shot, anyway. It should have been a clue to me that Etta Hulme hadn't won yet, and she had been doing really great cartoons for longer time and with a much wider syndication than I had. But—ignorantly—I liked my chances anyway.

Being just a little bit famous in a relatively small place can sure go to a person's head. I wasn't as famous as the local weatherman or any of the college football coaches in the area. But a cartoon of mine did appear in *Ms. Magazine*; another had been featured on CBS's *Face the Nation*, and, in 1980, my actual picture was in *USA Today*. The photographer they sent to take my photo told me she also did some work for *Newsweek*, so I asked, "Why don't you tell them to run one of my cartoons once in a while?"

She lowered her camera and sneered, "You're *getting* your picture in *USA Today*."

"I'd *rather* see one of my cartoons in *Newsweek*—my work's important to me."

"That's what they all say," she shrugged. That photographer must have been accustomed to egotistical jerks, but every cartoonist knows that publicity is just a means to help you keep doing cartoons.

All of that publicity put together was not a big deal—but back then, I thought it might help me keep doing what I loved to do. For the first time in my life, I actually felt successful at something. I felt competent—proud of the work I was doing.

But I never felt secure. All I cared about was job security at *The Greenville News*. Though a little more money would have been nice, I really didn't want to go anywhere else. I felt like the kiddie-show host in Roger Miller's song "King of Kansas City" who turns down a better job for more money in Omaha because he's "the hero of the younger set."

I'm the number one attraction
At every supermarket
Parking lot,
I'm the King of Kansas City,
No thanks, Omaha,
Thanks a lot.

By about 1982 or 1983, I was beginning to think that some kind of award—*anything*—would soon be necessary for me to hang on at *The Greenville News*. I did win one award, but, in the end,

it didn't help. I won the Freedoms Foundation's principal award, their George Washington medal for editorial cartooning in 1981, for a cartoon I did contrasting the joyous reception given to the fifty-two hostages from Iran with the indifference—even hostility—returning Vietnam veterans had faced only a few years earlier.



The Freedoms Foundation may have mistaken me for a conservative. They were very nice, though. My mother flew to Atlanta for the formal banquet and ceremony, leaving my sister Marty to fend for herself in the hospital after an appendectomy. I gave a speech in which I mentioned that giving awards to cartoonists only encourages them, and added that my father would have been proud of this one. General Vernon Walters was the keynote speaker, and he did a great job of scaring us to death about all of Russia's nuclear bombs and how we need more military and defense stuff. I wasn't really listening—but I was drawing.



General Vernon Walters

The Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning didn't go to a woman until several years after I left *The Greenville News*. I'm glad it went to my colleague, Signe Wilkinson of *The Philadelphia Daily News*. Her cartoons display her rare combination of wit, good sense, and talent. Ann Telnaes, another great cartoonist—talented and fearless—was the second woman awarded a Pulitzer. Hers came after the millennium, so that's at least one woman per century. I hope more women will become political cartoonists, and that it will become less remarkable for people of my gender to snag cartooning Pulitzers.

We cartoonists who lose our jobs, it seems to me, are sort of like old baseball players who can't admit that the game is over for them—who will think of themselves as baseball players forever. I'll always be a cartoonist. I still do cartoons every now and then, just to entertain or comfort myself.

My friend and cousin-by-marriage, Jimmy (who disagrees with my politics one hundred percent), actually *was* a major-league baseball player in the 1960s and '70s. His professional baseball career spanned North America from Montreal to Hawaii, with stops at most of the teams along the way, including the Dodgers for a while. (Jimmy had something of an allergy to baseball managers.) Since his playing days ended, he has coached, sold sports equipment, managed farm teams, and scouted for various major league teams. He has an uncanny knack for spotting good athletes, and for recommending seemingly minor adjustments that can dramatically improve a player's performance. He'll spend two hours telling you how to throw a knuckleball if you let him, or how to hold a bat so that you get a natural follow-through. (After listening to him for several hours one night, I tried his hitting technique at infield practice for a young softball team my husband was coaching. For the first time in my life, I could actually hit the softball—with either hand!)

Once, before I resigned, Jimmy heard me express my fear that I might have to quit my job or risk being fired. In his uniquely sensitive way, he turned to the other friends who were present and said, "What the hell's the matter with her? Hasn't she ever quit a job or been fired before?" Then he turned to me and said, "Kate, these guys"—our friends—"they work for themselves, so they don't understand. But with you and me, well—there's always some SOB standing between us and perfection."

Back in 1980, I had signed a five-year contract with the Field Newspaper Syndicate, which placed my cartoons in a package with the work of five other cartoonists. They planned to market us to newspapers under the title, "The Best and the Wittiest." It's an awful name, I know, but nobody asked us cartoonists before they named the package. My own suggestion would have been "The Field Hands." (Later, the Chicago Sun-Times Company, which owned the syndicate, was sold to Rupert Murdoch and the name of the syndicate was changed to News Group Chicago, then again to News America Syndicate. I think it's called North America Syndicate now, but my former mates in our little package are still laboring under "The Best and the Wittiest"—or they were the last time I checked.)

National syndication meant that my cartoons were automatically sent to the more than 200 papers subscribing to our cartoon service. Suddenly, my work was appearing in newspapers from San Francisco to Philadelphia. It brought in more money, too, which was nice.

I knew that resigning from *The Greenville News* meant risking the syndication for which I'd worked so hard. Other cartoonists who had lost their base newspapers had subsequently been dropped by their syndicates. My editor at the syndicate was not optimistic. He pointed out that national syndicates, as a rule, believe that a newspaper's name beneath a cartoonist's signature lends an authority to the work that few cartoonists can claim on their own—and furthermore, it was his opinion that cartoonists without base newspapers don't produce high quality work.

I called the editorial page editor of *The Florence Morning News*, who had run some of my cartoons in the past. His paper was already subscribing to the syndicate package, so he agreed to let me use *The Florence Morning News* as my base paper as long as he wasn't bound to run every one of my priceless gems. He even offered to pay me a little bit for any extra state cartoons I sent him. That's how I was able to keep my syndication. In fact, the editor of "The Best and the Wittiest" told me that he was surprised to see my cartoons improve with my resignation from *The Greenville News*!

Unfortunately, the syndicate editor who liked my work was fired in 1985. He called from



California to warn me. We both knew what it meant. The new syndicate editors weren't as thrilled with my cartoons, so I terminated that contract just short of renegotiation time.

For a while, I did nothing but refinish furniture, build shelves, and drive my family crazy. When I started talking about ripping up all the carpet in the house and replacing it with a do-it-yourself parquet floor, Jim finally suggested that perhaps I should explore the cartooning opportunities left to me. In October 1986, on my own, I started a small fax syndicate designed to sell state cartoons to South Carolina newspapers, and by the summer of 1987 there were nine newspapers subscribing to my work.

The next September, however, I was forced to admit that, although it was fun, my state syndicate was costing more money than it was earning. I could draw the cartoons, but had no clue how to sell them or how to operate a business. I took a deep breath and reluctantly closed up shop.

About the time I gave up my state syndicate, another newspaper agreed to run my political cartoons. I did cartoons until 1988 for *The Anderson Independent-Mail*, and, after that, for a small syndicate called Associated Features.

I would have made more money during this time if I had been working as a part-time greeter at Wal-Mart, and I am dead serious when I tell you it's probably the only other sort of work I could manage. On second thought—I wouldn't be able to do that, either, if you have to get to work on time and be nice to people.

During those last three or four years at *The Greenville News*, in fact, there had been days when, driving past road construction crews on my way to work, I would envy the guy whose job it was to stand there with the sign that says "STOP" on one side and "SLOW" on the other. Not the one with the walkie-talkie, who had to coordinate with another sign guy farther down the road. That would be too complicated and fraught with opportunities for disaster.

So, in 1988, as far as cartooning was concerned, I was fourth and long—a punting situation. My options had run out, and it was time to give up possession. But it was hard to accept. I've always had trouble watching football on TV—not because I'm not interested, but because I can't watch a punting team jogging onto the field without feeling a bit of their defeat at that moment.

Rather than pace on the sidelines, I started hanging out with my Clemson friends who teach elementary school. These women dragged me into every “teacher’s store” they could find. When I reluctantly followed them into a children’s bookstore, I thought I’d hit bottom. I have never liked children’s books that much—not even as a child. I’d always preferred comics or funny parts of novels that my family read to me. There was a novel called *Helen’s Babies* that Mama read to us, and we kids requested parts of it every night. My parents did read children’s books to me—Mother Goose and fairy tales. I hated the cute morality stories designed to teach children to behave themselves. The few picture books I can recall captured my attention through writing that didn’t talk down to me or through art that drew me in.

I didn’t read to my own children enough. Many of my friends took their toddlers to the library once a week to choose new books to read—and I’ve heard many writers declare that their mothers introduced them to libraries at an early age. Alas, I was not among those prescient mothers. We’ve always had a lot of books around the house, but libraries have confused and overwhelmed me all my life. I can’t find my way around in them, and I’m always afraid I’ll forget to return the book, or even lose it. James and Salley had to be content with whatever children’s books we already had, or with the books others gave us. Such was my distaste for children’s books that I only read aloud to them things that I enjoyed, too. We read Dr. Seuss books, because they were silly and fun (and quietly subversive), and Richard Scarry’s books, because I enjoyed learning simple things like what people do all day.

When my friends entered the children’s bookstore, I whined and slumped like a kid after them. As I sulked from shelf to shelf, dragging my fingers over what I considered predictable fare—Disney “books-of-the-movie,” elementary word-play silliness, and stories about rabbits and bears going to school—one cover caught my eye. It looked as if it had been illustrated by a political cartoonist. I checked, but the illustrator was someone I’d never heard of—Stephen Gammell. His colored-pencil illustrations were funny, simple, and imaginative. Simple illustrations are hard to do, because the artist must combine an expert eye for the subject with a seemingly effortless command of his medium. It’s almost impossible to distort something into a satisfying caricature of itself unless you’ve drawn the real thing first. This guy was a real artist. The story was short, as a picture-book story should be, but it was full of characters and action and humor. Best of all, there was no moral. It was just itself. It was nothing more or less than a joyfully satisfying poem. The illustrations and the text went together so well that it was hard to remember afterwards which elements of the story had been told in words and which through pictures. I bought that book, written by poet Cynthia Rylant. It was called *The Relatives Came*, and it started me off on a new career.

I started playing around with colored pencils and—despite my chronic library anxiety—went to the Clemson University library to check out every book I could find on the writing and illustrating of picture books. I wanted to know what makes a good picture book and how the text and illustrations fit together. The first guidebooks I checked out were older ones that outlined what kinds of writing and illustration worked best in picture books. They listed a few examples of books that were well written and illustrated, so I checked some of those out next and studied them carefully. Then I went back for more information, this time selecting more recent books and magazines that also explained the mechanics of picture-book construction—how many pages make up the average picture book (thirty-two); how the pages are folded and cut; how to design your pages; how to decide whether to lay out your book in double-page spreads or to do it one page at a time; and many other things nobody thinks you have to know.

After months of research, I wrote down the stories and drew pencil illustrations for about three picture books, making them into storyboards, like a cartoon strip—two panels at a time, each representing a double-page spread. It had taken me seven months of full-time work to get that far—and I still hadn’t figured out how to get the books to a publisher. (I had to read *more*

books about that.) Finally, I sent all three books to about ten publishers each. When one book was rejected by a publisher, I'd send it to another. In order to keep the system straight, I had a kind of handmade graph of when and where each book had been sent—and when it had been rejected. I was rejected by many of the finest publishers in New York. One day's mail held seven rejections. That was a record. I didn't take it personally, because (a) I'd worked for newspaper editors; (b) I had more than one story out there; and (c) it really wasn't personal. Most of the rejections came in the form of a card or a form letter.

Finally, two publishers called to express interest in the same story. One wasn't crazy about the art, and the other wasn't crazy about the writing. I rejoiced at having spoken with *two publishers!* Then Simon and Schuster called to say they wanted to publish my story, "The Pink House." They weren't quite ready to sign off on my art, though—I had, after all, never illustrated a picture book before. So, before they made a decision about my illustrations for "The Pink House," they asked me to illustrate a book by Dianne Johnston Hamm called *How Many Feet in the Bed?*, a counting book in which three children climb into their parents' bed and count all the feet by twos. The editor at Simon and Schuster thought it would be a difficult book to illustrate because there was little or no action in the text. She felt that the illustrations needed to lend the book a "cinemagraphic" feel; static illustrations could bog it down. Luckily, I loved Dianne Hamm's text; I have since learned that I sometimes have to turn a job down if, on the first reading, I can't see the scenes in my head. While I was illustrating that first book, I wrote another book and sent it to my editor at Simon and Schuster. They called to say they wanted to put *The Pink House* on the back burner and publish the new book, *A Gracious Plenty*, next—which they did. So, by 1991, Simon and Schuster had published two books with my name on them, which I thought would make it easy to get more work. Maybe it would have, if I hadn't started another cartoon fax service to newspapers—and quit writing picture books. By the time I figured out that this cartoonist thing was over (at least as far as actually getting *paid* to do cartoons went), Simon and Schuster had been taken over by Paramount or Viacom or some other huge multinational conglomerate—and both my editor and art director had left. I no longer knew anyone in the building, and they didn't know me.

I was able to get some illustration work for other publishers, but not enough to keep me out of trouble. I didn't realize in those days that the big publishers are not going to send you on a book tour or get you on the *Today Show* unless you are a famous person—like the Duchess of York ("Fergie"), who wrote a series of silly stories about a helicopter named "Budgie." Most author/illustrators have to be their own publicists and sell their own books.

Many times, I would set up school visits on my own, relying on the local booksellers to get my books there—and the books would not arrive in time. This happened too many times to suit me. Then, in 1995, *A Gracious Plenty* went out of print. Jim and I got the rights and films to that book from Simon and Schuster, and, in 1998, we formed our own independent publishing company, Warbranch Press, Inc. We took the films for *A Gracious Plenty* to a printing company in Anderson, South Carolina, and had them print 4,000 copies in softcover. Later, when I'd finished the illustrations for *The Pink House*, we took those to the same printer—Electric City Printing—and had 5,000 copies printed.

We sold those books ourselves, knowing that if we didn't, we'd face a serious storage problem. We ordered cases of the books I'd illustrated for other publishers and sold those, too. That way, we knew we'd have enough books to cover any event.

I gave presentations at schools, charging an honorarium, but granting a ten percent rebate on sales of my books. I also presented at reading conferences, teacher's conferences, and other meetings. That led to other school visits. Thank goodness, after a couple of years, Jim retired from the Clemson University agronomy department and began to manage our business full-time.

By then, I had another two books ready to go, and we published *The Little Chairs* in 1999. But for the first five years, Warbranch Press lost money. *A Gracious Plenty* and *The Pink House* had already sold out and been reprinted, but we weren't charging enough to cover our costs.

By the fifth year, we were ready to give it up; but with the publication of our last two books—nonfiction picture books about the Revolutionary War in South Carolina—we started making a slight profit. I hadn't realized that such books were needed as resource material for third-grade classrooms in this state until someone from the state Department of Education spotted *Palmetto: Symbol of Courage*, which I wrote to inform the classes I visited about the history of our state tree and why it appears on the state flag. Schools and teachers began buying that book in large numbers. Our latest book, *Francis Marion and the Legend of the Swamp Fox*, is even more popular, thanks to the computer illustrations by our son, James. His art looks like lovely oil paintings, with none of the cartoony quality of my work.

I have, once again, found work I love. School visits are a cherished bonus to picture book writing that I never anticipated. I always tell the students that I write *picture* books, not *children's* books. The student groups often respond to my sense of humor even when their teachers don't—an indication that I have found my audience. But I write the books for myself, not for anyone else. If the students like the books, that makes me happy; but I tell them that they have their own stories to write, and that they should write for themselves.

Parents and educators often ask me what “grade level” my books are appropriate for. I honestly don't know. I've had adults buy my books for themselves, or for their siblings—and any book can be read aloud, so they are on the grade-level of whoever likes them.

I still do cartoons just for myself and for the annual Christmas T-shirts I've given to friends since 1989—and I'm still a member of the AAEC. We go to as many of their conventions as we can. I feel more at home there than with the children's book writers. Children's book writers are, as a group, very nice people, but they don't often get kicked out of bars and hotels at four a.m. for singing too loud, and I would miss that.



The ToonTones, our cartoonist “pickup” band, at a convention in the early 1980s. Tim Menees plays piano while Dwane Powell (in flannel) plays guitar, Bill Sanders plays banjo, and I sing. Mike Keefe plays everything, but here he’s just on mandolin.



Canadian cartoonist Blaine's picture of me.