



A St. Louis Bird That Crosses Divides Gets His Own Show

Weatherbird cartoons that have graced the front pages of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch for 125 years are on exhibit at the Field House Museum.

By Valerie Schremp Hahn Reporting from St. Louis

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This article is part of the Fine Arts & Exhibits special section on how creativity can inspire in challenging times.

The Weatherbird, who has appeared on the front page of The St. Louis Post-Dispatch every day for nearly 125 years, is a bit of an equalizer, even in divisive times.

“You know, people will always disagree with an editorial,” said Dan Martin, who has been drawing the Weatherbird for 39 years. “People will say a news story is slanted, or the photograph should have been of something else.”

But the Weatherbird?



Dan Martin is The St. Louis Post-Dispatch's sixth Weatherbird artist. He has been drawing the cartoon bird for 39 years.

Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

"People have been complaining about newspapers for 250 years," said Martin, a soft-spoken man with the same occasionally cheeky humor as the bird. "And this is the one thing they generally don't complain about."

The Weatherbird, considered the oldest, continuously running daily cartoon in American journalism, is the subject of an exhibit, "Behind the Feathers: A Century of Weatherbird History," which opened in June and runs through Feb. 15 at the Field House Museum in downtown St. Louis.

The exhibition includes drawings of the Weatherbird over the decades, profiles of the artists who have drawn him, Weatherbird collectibles, fan art and instructions on how to draw the Weatherbird on your own.

Every day, the Weatherbird comments on the news and wears a different outfit, such as a Cardinals baseball uniform, a spacesuit or, sometimes, his birthday suit. (Years ago, he lost his feathers and grew arms. Martin adheres to decency standards, often with a strategically placed limb.)

Sometimes, the bird is reverently silent, such as for the Challenger space shuttle disaster and the assassinations of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and President John F. Kennedy.

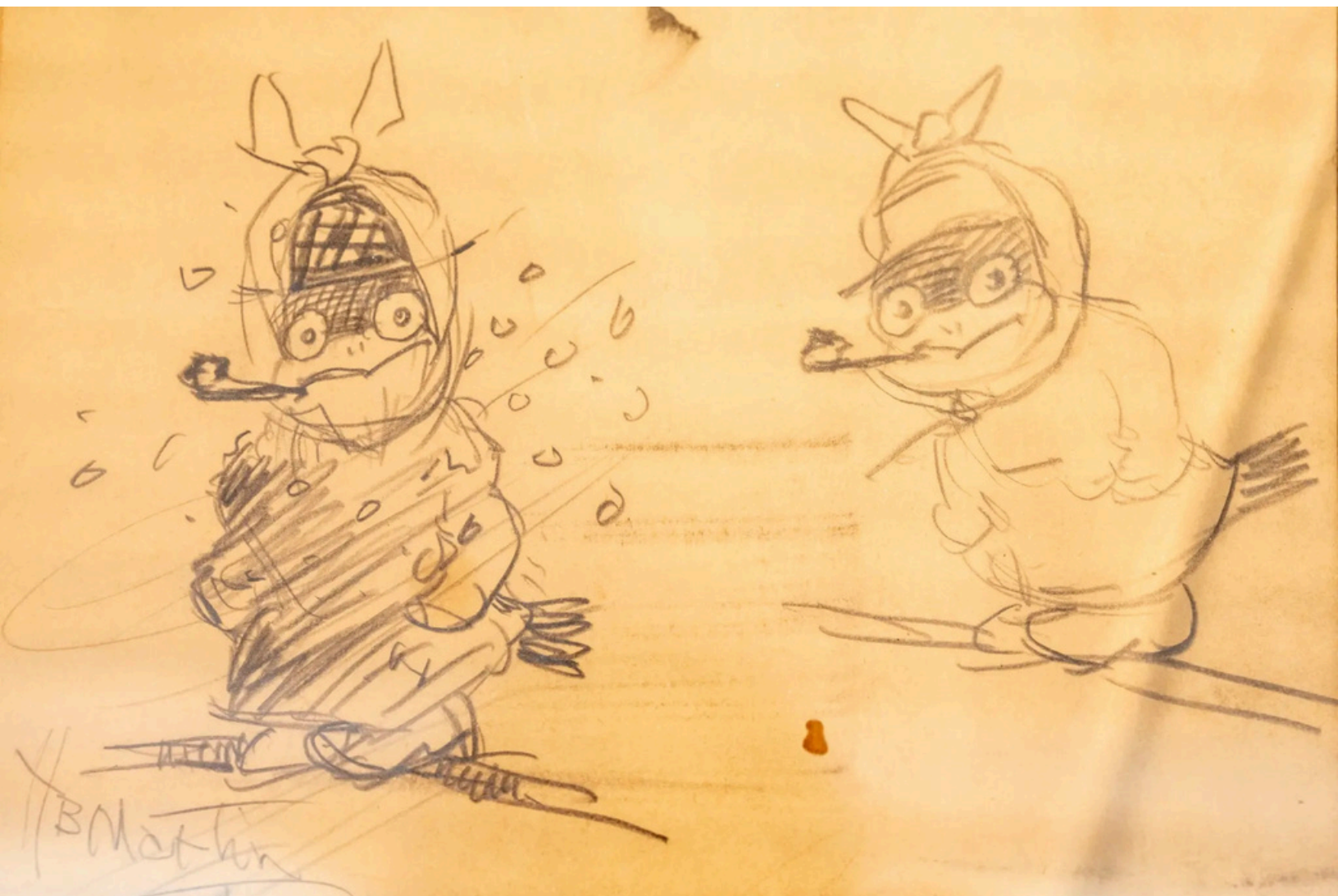
"He's so intertwined with our history," said Stephanie Bliss, executive director of the museum. "He's part of our ups, he's part of our downs, our wins, our losses. He's been there right along with us."

The museum was the home of Roswell Martin Field, a lawyer who represented the enslaved Dred Scott and his family in the fight for their freedom, and Field's son Eugene, the children's poet who often illustrated his newspaper columns and stories with his drawings. The home itself was saved from demolition in the 1930s in a campaign that started with an editorial from Irving Dilliard, who was editorial page editor at The Post-Dispatch from 1949 to 1957.

(Full disclosure: I wrote for The Post-Dispatch for 26 years. I own scads of used reporter's notebooks with the Weatherbird on the cover. Martin is a friend and former co-worker, and yes, so is the Weatherbird.)

Dan Martin, 67, is the newspaper's sixth Weatherbird artist. Three of them have had the surname Martin, though they were not related. All together, they drew more than 45,000 Weatherbirds.

The first artist, Harry B. Martin, got the idea for the bird after seeing a magazine illustration of shivering baby blackbirds. He drew several birds with the intention to run them with the weather forecast. On Feb. 11, 1901, the first bird appeared on the front page smoking a cigar, trudging through the snow, the tip of his wing shoved in the pocket of his coat.



A Weatherbird sketch drawn around 1945 by Harry B. Martin, the bird's creator.

Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

The bird had hatched.

Readers demanded more. That first bird was speechless, but early on, he commented on the weather. He soon offered observations on the day's news in a short quip known as the "bird line." A Post-Dispatch reporter, Carlos Hurd, became one of the newspaper's premier writers of the bird line, handling the duty for 30 years.

Hurd is also known for a memorable 1912 vacation he took with his wife. They were passengers on the Carpathia when it picked up survivors of the Titanic disaster, and Hurd scooped the world with the news.



The Weatherbird from when Zsa Zsa Gabor was arrested in 1989 for slapping a police officer. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

One of Dan Martin's favorite bird lines? When Zsa Zsa Gabor was arrested in 1989 for slapping a police officer, Martin drew a bird behind bars, wearing lipstick and a dress. The bird line? "Zsa Zsa in the Can-Can." From the early days, the bird has occasionally appeared as a she, Martin said.

"He can kind of be whatever he wants to be, do whatever he wants to do, as long as, you know, we consider libel and slander laws, copyright laws and things like that."

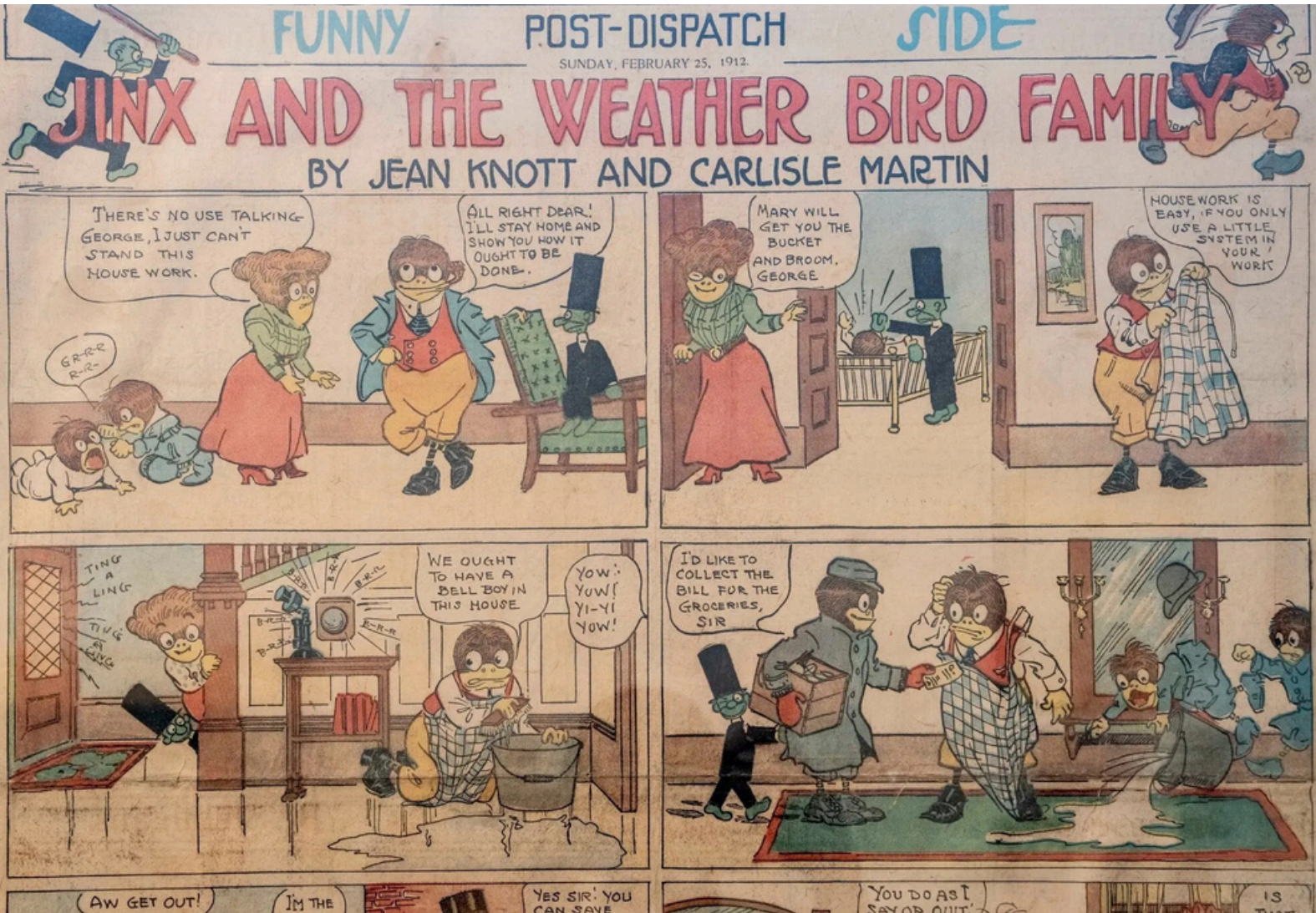
Though he is a bipartisan bird, he chirps opinions.

"He's made fun of presidents and politicians of both parties for 125 years," Martin said.



Original illustrations by the artist Albert Schweitzer, who drew the Weatherbird until 1986 when Martin took over.

Whitney Curtis for The New York Times



Weatherbird cartoons from 1912 by the illustrator S. Carlisle Martin. The bird has changed appearances over the years, losing his feathers and looking more like a frog during S. Carlisle Martin's tenure. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

The bird has changed appearances over the years, losing his feathers and looking more like a frog during the tenure of S. Carlisle Martin from about 1905 to 1932. Over the decades, his beak remained less pronounced. When Dan Martin started drawing the bird in 1986, after coaching from his predecessors Amadee Wohlschlaeger and Albert Schweitzer, he restored the beak and ditched the cigar, something Wohlschlaeger and the bird had both enjoyed.

Martin retired in 2023 from the newspaper, where he also held roles like staff artist and letters editor. Now, he draws the bird as a freelancer.

Late weekday afternoons, an editor emails him with a list of stories likely to appear on the next day's front page.

Martin chooses a story and comes up with an idea. In his basement studio in suburban St. Louis, he sketches the bird with pencil, draws over it with a Sharpie and a Micron pigment pen, then colors it digitally. He brainstorms ideas for a bird line, and an editor makes the final pick.

The process takes about an hour.



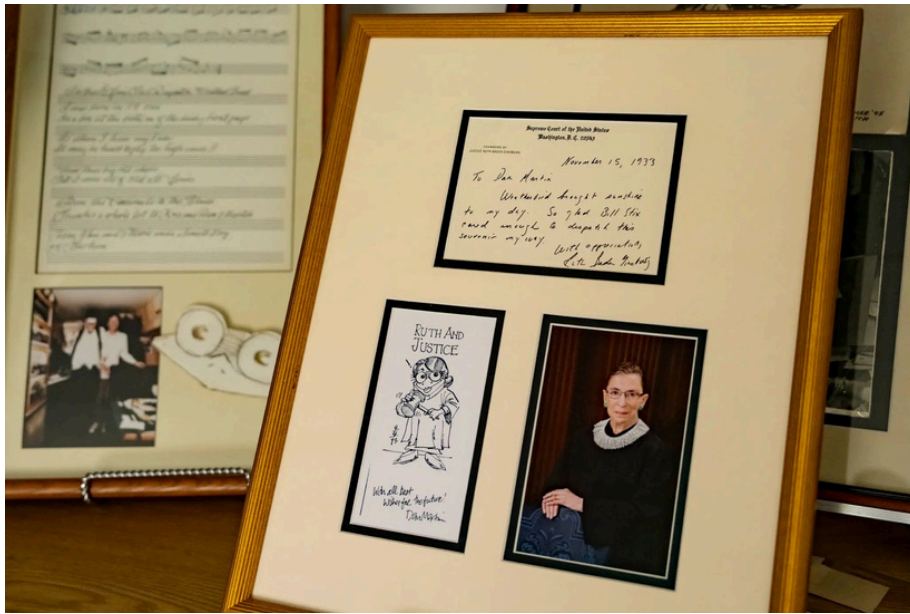
Dan Martin holding a small statue of the Weatherbird from the early to mid-1900s. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times



A mug featuring the Weatherbird from Martin's collection of Weatherbird memorabilia. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

Martin is a keeper of Weatherbird memorabilia, contributing items for the exhibit, many from the same basement. There are scrapbooks of Weatherbird cartoons, original drawings, hand carved Weatherbird bottle stoppers, and decks of cards and matchbooks from a series of corporate airplanes named the Weatherbird, all once used by The Post-Dispatch. There is sheet music of "The Weatherbird Reel" by the composer and musician John Hartford, photos of fans with Weatherbird tattoos, and Weatherbird clocks, coasters and cups.

"How many other commercial entities would love to have some sort of mascot that people knew about, that they could use to promote their product?" Martin asked.



A framed letter from the former Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whom Martin drew as the Weatherbird in 1993 when she took her seat, rests on a shelf in his home studio. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

The exhibit includes photos of the Weatherbird with the meteorologist Al Roker and the television show host Andy Cohen, a St. Louis native. There is a copy of a fan letter from Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the former Supreme Court justice, whom the Weatherbird depicted in 1993 when she took her seat. A mutual contact had mailed her the original drawing.

“Weatherbird brought sunshine to my day,” she wrote to Martin.

The bird line? “Ruth and Justice.”

There is no obvious successor to Martin. He enjoys drawing the bird, and he noted that editors are not asking about his blood pressure. But if there was a room full of young artists in the newsroom, and one of them was interested, he would not hesitate to turn it over.

“The funniest line to this is, I asked my wife, ‘How long should I do this?’” Martin said. “And she says, ‘Until you’re incapacitated.’”

On his days off, editors sub in a bird from the archives, switching the date and the bird line.

And when Martin does not draw the bird anymore, maybe editors will use old birds, or maybe artificial intelligence will take over, he said.

But until the day the Weatherbird goes silent, he’ll have something to say to the world.