

# 5-YEAR-OLD MENACE



By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

The daily newspaper comic panel “Dennis the Menace,” distributed by King Features Syndicate, appears in nearly 1,000 newspapers in 48 countries and has been adapted into TV series, movies and animated videos.

Dennis was modeled by animator and cartoonist Hank Ketcham on his own son, also named Dennis. “Dennis the Menace” first appeared in 16 U.S. newspapers on March 12, 1951 — 75 years ago.

## GOTTA KETCHAM ALL

Henry “Hank” Ketcham was born in 1920 in Seattle, Washington. At age 18, he moved to Los Angeles, hoping to work in animation.

He spent a year and a half working on Walter Lantz’s “Andy Panda” cartoons before making the leap to Walt Disney, where he worked on “Pinocchio,” “Fantasia,” “Bambi” and a number of Donald Duck short films.

He enlisted during World War II but was assigned to creating posters, training materials and cartoons for the war bond program.



LOS ANGELES TIMES PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE AT UCLA LIBRARY

Ketcham sets a wonderful example for his son, relaxing at home in 1953.

After the war, Ketcham worked as a freelance gag cartoonist, selling his work to magazines like Collier’s and the Saturday Evening Post.

One day in October 1950, while Ketcham worked in his home studio, his wife exploded in anger: Their 4-year-old son, Dennis, had found, um, “material” in his underpants and played with it in his bedroom. This made quite a smelly mess.

“Your son is a menace!” Alice yelled.

The creator’s light bulb in Ketcham’s head lit up.

## LAUNCHING ‘DENNIS THE MENACE’

Ketcham thought: “There’s ‘Tillie the Toiler’ and ‘Felix the Cat.’ Why couldn’t there be ... ‘Dennis the Menace’? Wow! Why not?”

“I hauled out the shoe box where I stored my gags, picked out a dozen kid ideas and feverishly translated them into rough pencil sketches that I air-mailed to John Kennedy, my agent, and waited for the explosion” he wrote in his 1990 autobiography.

“It arrived ten days later by way of Western Union: ‘Rob Hall new president of Post Syndicate very interested STOP. Wants to see another 12 samples STOP. Looks like we might have a sale.’”

Post-Hall Syndicate bought the strip in November 1950. This gave Ketcham four months to try to get 16 weeks ahead of his publishing schedule. He worked up a supporting cast for Dennis: He based the mother and father on himself and his wife, the put-upon neighbor, Mr. Wilson, on Ketcham’s old Sunday School superintendent and Margaret on Ketcham’s old schoolboy crush.

The strip was launched on March 12, 1951 in 16 newspapers. “Most of these clients were paying three to five dollars a week,” Ketcham wrote. “Had it not been for the dear Chicago Tribune, which agreed to a \$100 rate for its circulation area, ‘Dennis’ would still be in the ink bottle.”

By the end of 1951, “Dennis the



“GO AHEAD, DADDY — SQUIRT IT RIGHT IN HIS EYE!”

March 12, 1951: The first “Dennis the Menace” comic strip.

Menace” was appearing in more than a hundred newspapers. “The sales chart was not an upward curve,” Ketcham wrote, “but more the flight of an arrow.”

Like many comic strip and panel artists of the day, Ketcham relied on a series of gag writers to inspire the content of his work. His most frequent collaborator was Bob Harmon, who Ketcham didn’t meet face-to-face until several years after they began corresponding.

Reaction to the strip was overwhelmingly positive. In 1959, CBS launched a “Dennis the Menace” sitcom that ran for 146 episodes over four seasons. A number of animated films began production in the 1980s.

A live-action “Dennis the Menace” film starring Walter Matthau as Mr. Wilson and written by John Hughes — the guy who wrote and produced the Dennis-like 1990 film “Home Alone” — was released in 1993.

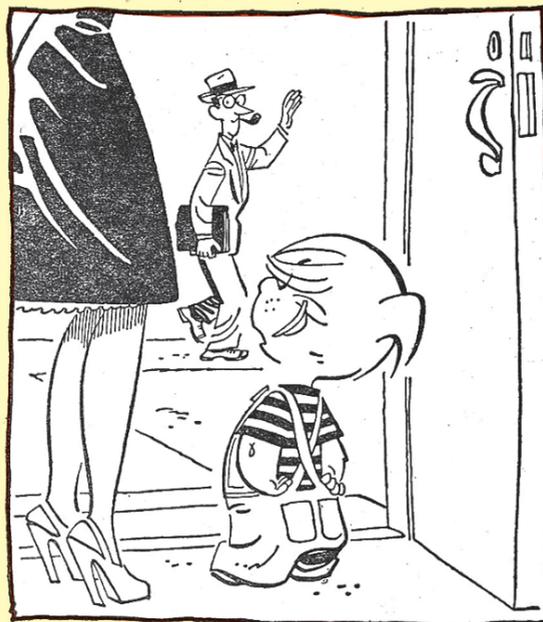
One regret Ketcham expressed was naming the strip after his eldest son. Dennis served in Vietnam, suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and had very little contact with his father afterward.

Ketcham retired in 1994, turning over drawing the daily strip to his former assistants, Marcus Hamilton and Ron Ferdinand. Ketcham’s son, Scott, joined the creative team in 2010.

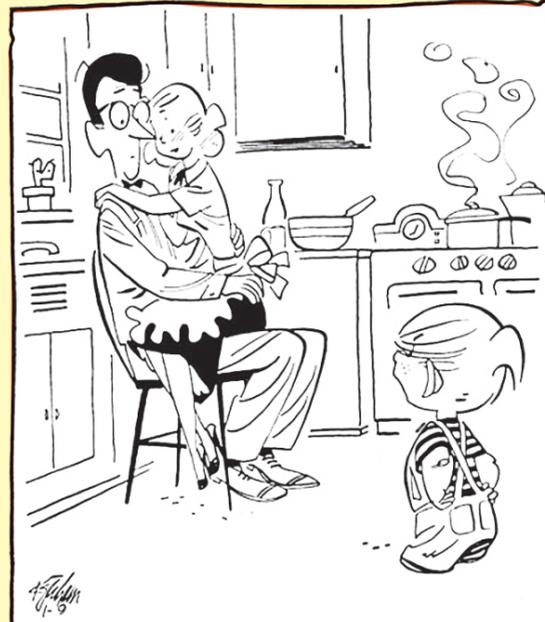
Hank Ketcham died in 2001 at age 81.



“YOU DIDN’T CATCH US! WE RAN OUTA GAS!”

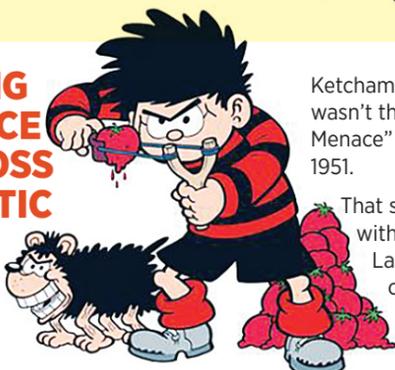


“HOW COME HE SNEAKS OUT EVERY MORNING AND LEAVES YOU WITH ALL THE WORK?”



“HEY! I THOUGHT YOU WERE FIXING DINNER!”

## AN AMAZING COINCIDENCE FROM ACROSS THE ATLANTIC



Ketcham’s Dennis, it turns out, wasn’t the only “Dennis the Menace” launched on March 12, 1951.

That same day, a comic strip with that name by artist David Law debuted in a children’s comic magazine, “The Beano,” published in Dundee, Scotland.

The strip featured a boy who was constantly getting in trouble. Seventeen years later, Dennis gained a sidekick in the form of an “Abyssinian wire-haired tripe hound” named Gnasher.

Unlike the American Dennis, this character is very destructive and often finds himself getting spanked for his antics.

Over the years, the U.K. Dennis has been adapted into books and animated features. For several years, its publisher retitled the strip “Dennis the Menace and Gnasher” to help avoid confusion.

Similarly, the 1993 U.S. live-action movie was released in the U.K. as simply: “Dennis.”