

Politics of
Yesterday & Today:
Revisiting Cartoonist
Bruce Shanks

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The Bruce Shanks Political Cartoon Collection

The art form of political cartooning has long been used as a platform for artists to air the grievances of the public through the creation of satirical and sometimes comedic works. Although different types of political cartooning had been around for centuries, the art form most notably reached a golden age after the end of the Civil War due to increasing innovations in printing technology and its subsequent decrease in cost.¹ This popular tradition carried on through the twentieth century into the present day, and although the ways in which we are able to view and enjoy these works of art has changed to a virtual capacity, despite still being able to find them physically printed in some newspapers and magazines, they still serve the same purpose and carry the same meanings as they did decades and even centuries ago.

The purpose of this report is to discuss Bruce Shanks' life and work, the items that are included in the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library's collection, and to provide a historically contextualized interpretation, or rather, a critical analysis of the pieces in the collection, along with how Mr. Shanks' artwork was representative of the time period in which it was created. Moreover, this report will also give insight into the ongoing relevance of Bruce Shanks' editorial cartoons and why they remain to be important in order to better comprehend the eras from which they derived in addition to the present-day.

1. Tom Culbertson, "The Golden Age of American Political Cartoons," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7, no. 3 (July 2008): 277-79, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25144529?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

Bruce Shanks: *Buffalo Times* Staff Artist



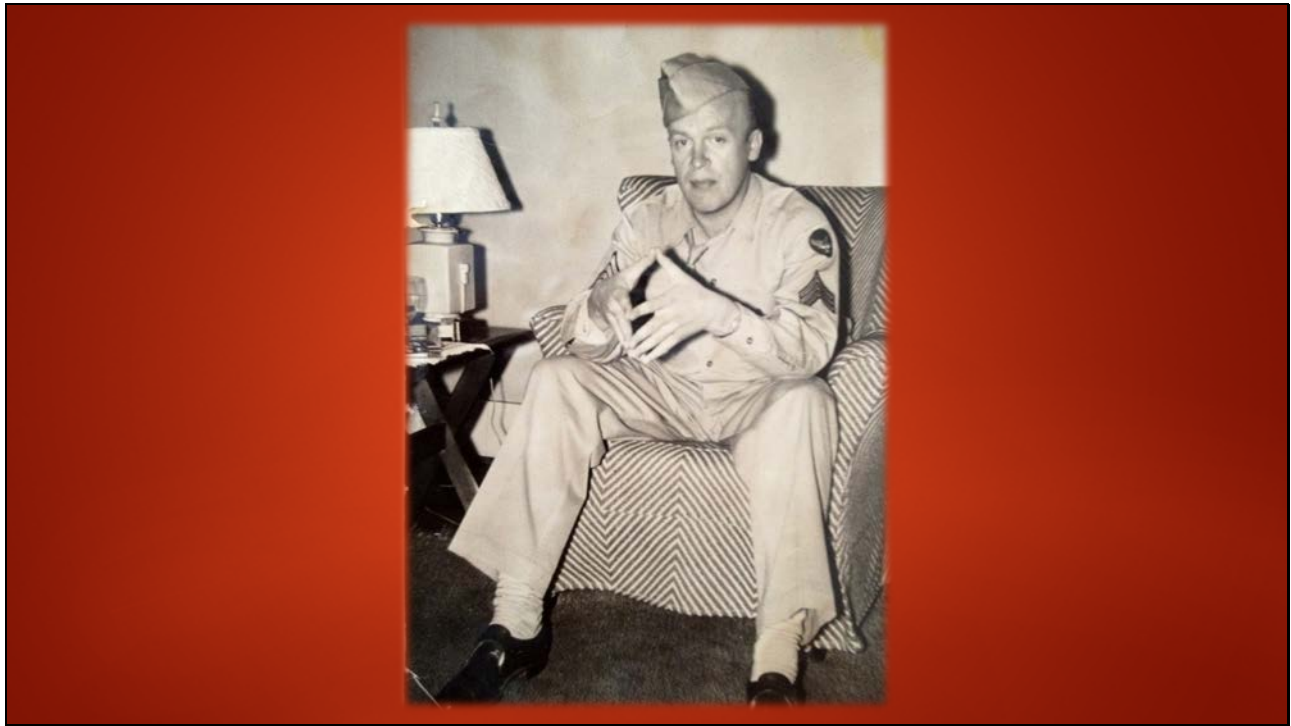
Bruce McKinley Shanks was born in Buffalo on January 29, 1908 to George Shanks, Sr. and Helen Shanks. He attended School 38 and Lafayette High School, although he left his formal schooling behind when he became employed by the *Buffalo Courier-Express* as a copy boy. Although several newspaper articles regarding Bruce Shanks' background state that he discontinued his education in either 1926 or 1927 to work for the *Buffalo Courier-Express*, the New York State Census and the Buffalo City Directory cite that he had been working for the *Express* as early as 1925.² Despite never graduating from high school, Shanks attributed his art teacher, Miss Elizabeth Weiffenbach, with inspiring him to hone his artistic talents and pursue a successful career as a cartoonist. As a copy boy, Bruce Shanks drew cartoons on the side, to which he was astounded when he discovered that his cartoons were occasionally published on the front cover of the newspaper.³ After a few years he left the *Courier-Express* and was hired as a staff artist for the *Buffalo Times*, where he would retouch photographs and draw sketches to illustrate news stories.⁴ It appears that he provided an extensive amount of illustrations for the sports section and sketched scenes from plays and movies that were being shown locally.⁵

2. *State Population Census Schedules, 1925*, New York, Erie County, Buffalo, Block 5, Election District 1, Ward 21, Assembly District 2, p. 16, line 30, George Shanks household, digital image, Ancestry.com, <http://www.ancestry.com>, accessed June 23, 2014.

3. Lance Zavitz, "News Cartoonist Shanks Tells How It Feels to Capture a Pulitzer Prize," *Buffalo Evening News*, May 6, 1958, Local Biographies, ser. 26, Local History File, Central Library: Rare Book Room, Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, p. 323-4; "Bruce Shanks Dies; News Cartoonist Won Pulitzer Prize," *Buffalo Evening News*, April 13, 1980, Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, p. 1, microfilm.

4. "Bruce Shanks Dies; News Cartoonist Won Pulitzer Prize," p. 1.

5. Bruce Shanks, "John Williams as Capt. Stanhope in 'Journey's End,'" in Ardis Smith, "'Journey's End,' Tragic Hit, Was Only the Beginning For Amateur Playwright," *Buffalo Evening News*, February 22, 1969, BECP, p. B-9, microfilm; Bruce Shanks, "Rio Rita," *Buffalo Times*, October 17, 1929, BECP, microfilm; Bruce Shanks, "Dartmouth's Great Grid Star," *Buffalo Times*, October 27, 1929, BECP, microfilm; Bruce Shanks, "At Journey's End," *Buffalo Times*, October 30, 1929, BECP, microfilm.



Bruce left the *Times* and joined the *Buffalo Evening News* in 1933 as a staff artist and cartoonist, although he had left the *News* in 1942 to enlist in the armed forces during the Second World War. After serving as an Air Force Intelligence Officer in Orlando, Florida during the war, he returned to his post at the *Buffalo Evening News* in 1945 where he eventually became the head editorial cartoonist in 1951.⁶ For Bruce Shanks, this was the beginning of a very successful career that would ultimately make him a legend in the world of editorial cartooning.

To put it simply, Bruce Shanks was what could have been considered a magician with a brush. Although he had no formal art education other than standard high school art classes, Bruce was so talented and eminent in his discipline that he had received more than two dozen awards by the end of his 23 year career as head editorial cartoonist for the *Buffalo Evening News*, which also included the prestigious Pulitzer Prize that he won in 1958 for his cartoon depicting corruption by labor union leaders.⁷

His cartoons were included in newspapers and magazines all over the world, and he had received numerous requests for his original cartoon sketches from countless famous and powerful individuals, such as Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, former President of Egypt Gamal Abdul Nasser, as well as United States Senators, Supreme Court Justices, and even labor leader Jimmy Hoffa.⁸ When he retired in 1974, Bruce even claimed that he had drawn 6,643 editorial cartoons, which of course is not the final count since he continued to sketch cartoons for the *News* on occasion from his retirement home in Boca Raton, Florida until his death in 1980.⁹

6. Bruce Shanks in military uniform. Courtesy of James Chernetsky and Jeanne Diehl; Zavitz, "News Cartoonist," p. 323-4; "Shanks Appointed to Draw the News' Editorial Cartoons," *Buffalo Evening News*, June 18, 1951, Local Biographies, ser. 19, Local History File, BECPL, p. 265; "Bruce Shanks Dies."

7. Zavitz, p. 323-4; "Bruce Shanks Retires as News Editorial Cartoonist And Pokes Fun at Himself in Farewell Sketch," *Buffalo Evening News*, April 22, 1974, BECPL, p. 27-8, microfilm.

8. "Shanks Original Cartoons Go To White House, Roswell Park: Humorous Interpretation of Viruses Stirs Quick Response From Scientists," *Buffalo Evening News*, February 11, 1965, Local Biographies, ser. 34, vol. 2, Local History File, BECPL, p. 208; Nancy Tobin Willig, "The Lively Arts: Bruce Shanks," *Buffalo Magazine*, November 1967, Local History File, vol. 42, BECPL.

9. "Bruce Shanks Retires"; "Bruce Shanks Dies."



Though modest, Shanks had a keen sense of humor, was known for playing practical jokes on his fellow employees at the *News*, and insisted that he had never run out of ideas for his cartoons. From the November 1967 edition of *Buffalo Magazine* in an article highlighting his work, Shanks had said: I never run out... There are too many things happening for ideas not to come... the world, national, and local situations call for cartooning. When there is an increase in heavy, serious news and crises, the problems can be brought out best in something which lightens the situation, while giving the matter a twist. When things are fine, what can you criticize? Serious problems increase cartoon power.¹⁰

Having lived in Buffalo and having been able to experience life on the home front during the First World War, entering adulthood during the Great Depression, enlisting in the military during World War Two, and maintaining a prosperous career throughout all of the tumultuous events that made up what is known as the Cold War, Bruce Shanks was able to epitomize the hearts and minds of average Americans during the 20th century.

The Bruce Shanks Collection consists of several pieces which were acquired by the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library separately overtime. While two original cartoons were procured in 1989, the majority of the collection arrived between 2005 and July 2014 in four separate acquisitions. Included in the collection are eighteen original cartoons all ranging from the years 1959 to 1979 which were created by Bruce Shanks with pencil, ink, and gouache, as well as a reproduced print of another Bruce Shanks cartoon, and Bruce Shanks' signature on a large circular piece of drawing paper.¹¹

10. Willig, "The Lively Arts: Bruce Shanks."

11. Bruce Shanks, "If y'want anything done right, do it yourself," December 14, 1961, *Political Cartoons: Papers of Bruce Shanks*, Central Library: Rare Book Room, BECPL; Bruce Shanks, "Holiday Punch," December 29, 1961, *Political Cartoons: Papers of Bruce Shanks*, Central Library: Rare Book Room, BECPL; Bruce Shanks, *Seven Original Cartoons by Bruce Shanks, 1959-1960*, Central Library: Rare Book Room, BECPL; Bruce Shanks, *Political Cartoons: Papers of Bruce Shanks, 1959-1963*, Central Library: Rare Book Room, BECPL; Bruce Shanks, "The Pen Would Be Mightier!," December 11, 1970, Box 1.4, *Political Cartoons: Papers of Bruce Shanks, 1970-1971*, Central Library: Rare Book Room, BECPL; Bruce Shanks, "Another Waste of Energy," 1979, *Political Cartoons: Papers of Bruce Shanks*, Central Library: Rare Book Room, BECPL.

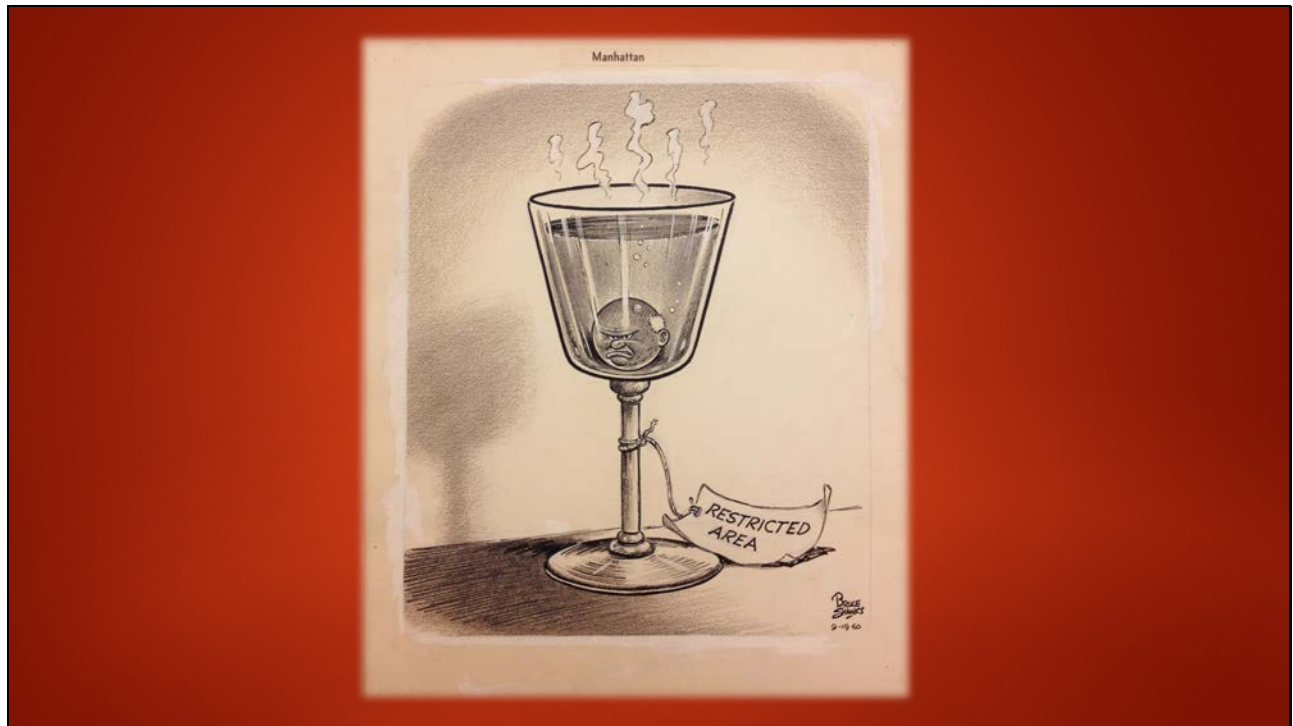
Slide 7



Also included in the collection are five original cartoons that were given to Bruce Shanks and his wife Louise on behalf of other well-known political cartoonists, such as Bill Crawford of the *Newark News*, Dan Dowling of the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *Kansas City Star*, Bruce Russell of the *Los Angeles Times*, and Charles Werner of the *Indianapolis Star*.¹²

12. Bruce Shanks, *Political Cartoons: Papers of Bruce Shanks, 1970-1971*, Central Library: Rare Book Room, BECPL.

Slide 8



Given his mastery of the discipline, Bruce Shanks was able to create artistic commentary on every issue that arose. Many of his famous works revolve around events that occurred as part of the Cold War, and naturally, one of his favorite characters for this topic was Premier Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union. In the cartoon titled "Manhattan" from September 19, 1960, Shanks decided to portray Premier Khrushchev as the maraschino cherry in the bottom of a Manhattan cocktail. This was an extremely brilliant play on words by Shanks given the context for which the cartoon was created.¹³

At this time, the United Nations General Assembly was about to take place at its headquarters in Manhattan in New York City. Having had the ability to use American media the year before on his tour of the United States, subsequent government concerns about the Soviets using that visit as Communist propaganda, and Khrushchev's denial of President Eisenhower to speak to the Russian people caused the United States to see him as an increased threat and therefore would not let him leave the confines of the UN headquarters.¹⁴ Thus, Shanks cartoon is referring to the Premier's displeasure of being stuck in Manhattan. A "Restricted Area" tag tied to the stem, which could be interpreted just as everything outside of the glass/"Manhattan" is off limits to him, or, the long stem of the glass could be representing Long Island, to which the Soviets owned an estate at Glen Cove.¹⁵

13. Bruce Shanks, "Manhattan," *Seven Original Cartoons by Bruce Shanks, 1959-1960*.

14. David Lawrence, "One Re-run We Can Do Without," *Buffalo Evening News*, September 19, 1960, BECP, p. 28, microfilm.

15. William J. Jordan, "SOVIET PROTESTS U.S. TRAVEL BAN FOR KHRUSHCHEV," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Sep 14, 1960, p. 1, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/115147502?accountid=7259>.

Slide 9

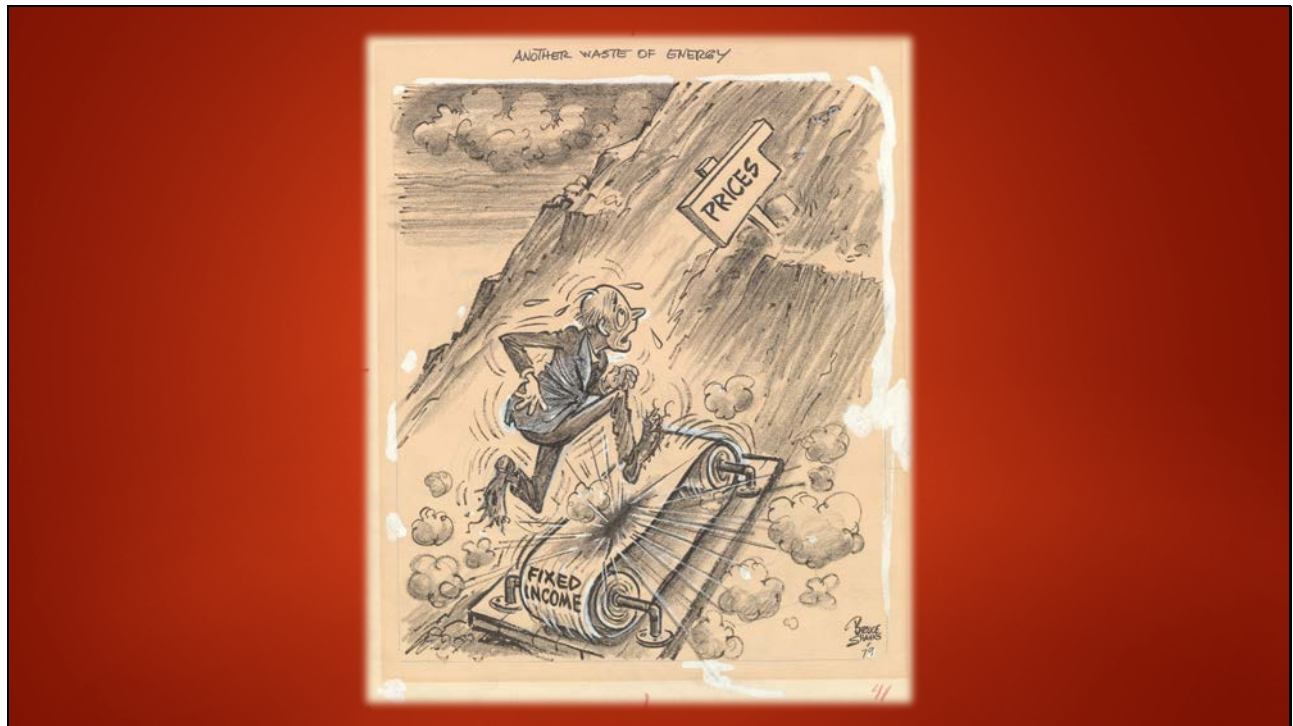


A Bruce Shanks' cartoon from three years later titled "Grist" shows Khrushchev again, however this drawing depicts him being able to use the issues in the United States revolving around Civil Rights to his advantage.¹⁶ At this specific time, there were marches and protests regarding segregation in the southern states and hundreds of marchers had been brutalized and arrested by police in Tallahassee, Florida.¹⁷ In this piece alone, Bruce Shanks was able to show his mastery and skill by linking national issues with international and foreign affairs.

16. Bruce Shanks, "Grist," *Political Cartoons: Papers of Bruce Shanks, 1959-1963*.

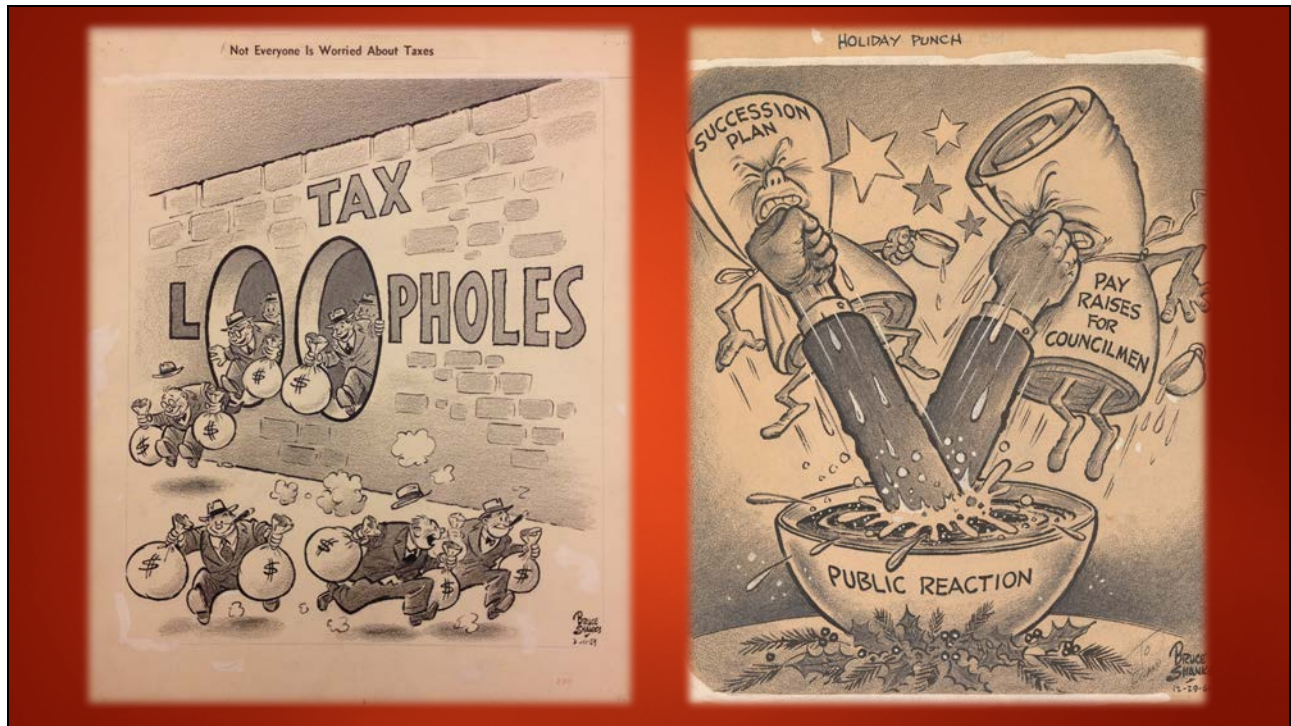
17. *Buffalo Evening News*, May 31, 1963, BECPL, p. 1, microfilm.

Slide 10



Along the same idea, the cartoon called “Another Waste of Energy” hits on multiple levels as it discusses an issue that was international in scope which also negatively impacted people on national and local levels. Being that Bruce Shanks created this cartoon in 1979, it’s fair to say that he was referring to severe inflation that was wreaking havoc on Americans and the United States economy which had slumped into a recession after the Shah of Iran was overthrown and the country’s oil production drastically decreased. Unfortunately, this cartoon is very relevant today. Presently, people are all too familiar with the terms “recession” and “inflation,” and many are struggling to make ends meet; not to mention that the price of gasoline still remains to be a major issue. Much as in Shanks’ cartoon, many people work as hard as possible but can never get ahead.¹⁸ It was also during the recession in 1979, much like the one that was experienced in 2008, that the auto industry was in turmoil which required the government bailout of Chrysler along with the car companies’ compliance to make smaller and more fuel-efficient cars.

18. Bruce Shanks, “Another Waste of Energy.”



Despite all of the occurrences in national and international news that required Shanks' artistic commentary, he also enjoyed drawing cartoons that dealt with regional or local issues. In the cartoon "Not Everyone is Worried About Taxes," several men are depicted jumping through "tax loopholes" in a wall with bags of cash.¹⁹ Shanks was referring to New York Governor Rockefeller's 2 billion dollar budget proposal for 1959 to 1960, which included a \$277 million tax increase, a \$234 million spending boost, decreases in personal income tax exemptions and several tax loopholes for insurance companies, banks, and businesses run by doctors, lawyers, dentists, and the like. Needless to say, this proposal was highly opposed, even by the Buffalo Chamber of Commerce, and many Buffalonians from all walks of life travelled to Albany to protest its passing.²⁰

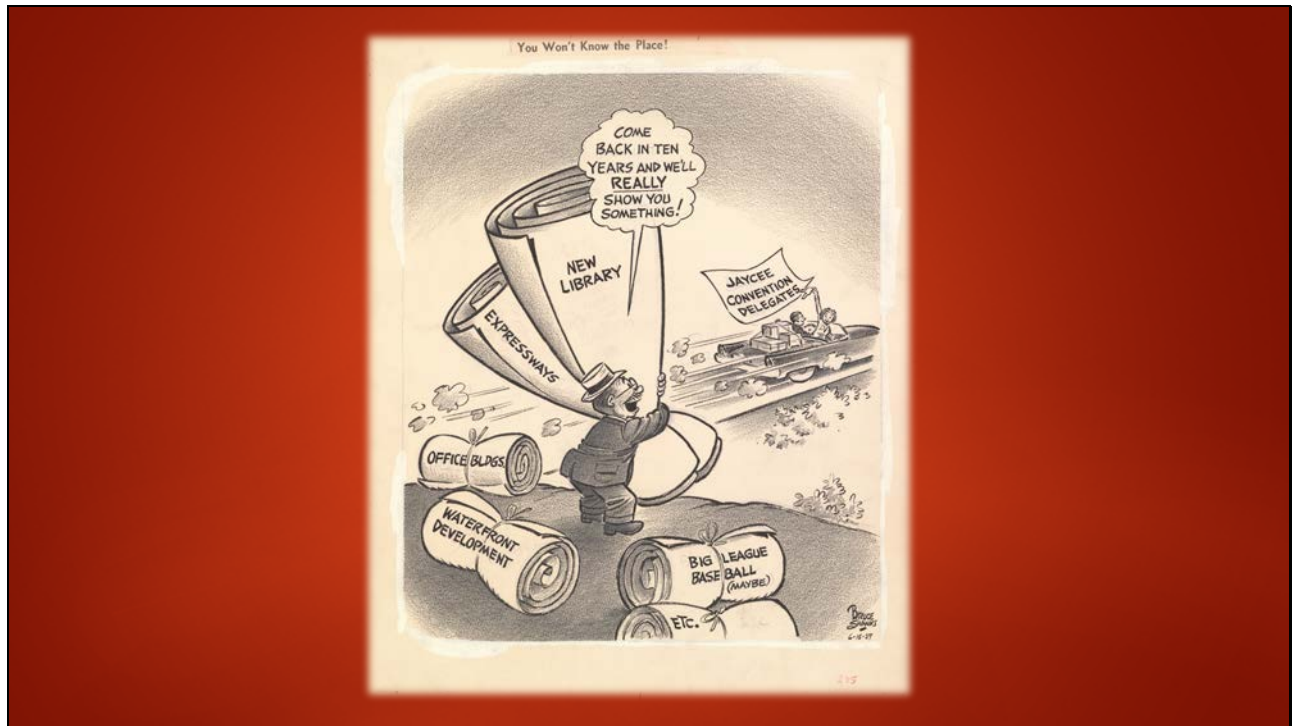
On the other hand, while the previous cartoon was about corruption at the state level, the cartoon aptly named "Holiday Punch" is about local political corruption.²¹ Bruce was able to convey the general feeling of anger and disgust that was felt by Buffalonians at the Buffalo Common Council having voted to give themselves salary raises and changing the rules of the Succession plan, which alleviated the restrictions on Councilmen being able to achieve tenure.²² Unfortunately, although the situations change slightly, these are issues that are still dealt with today in politics.

19. Bruce Shanks, "Not Everyone is Worried About Taxes," *Seven Original Cartoons by Bruce Shanks, 1959-1960*.

20. *Buffalo Evening News*, February 11, 1959, BECPL, p. 1, 42, 48, microfilm.

21. Bruce Shanks, "Holiday Punch."

22. *Buffalo Evening News*, December 13, 1961, BECPL, p. 49-50, microfilm.



Lastly, given Buffalo's history and struggles as a "rustbelt city," Bruce Shanks' cartoon titled "You Won't Know the Place!" is eerily relevant to many of the concerns Buffalonians face currently. The cartoon illustrates a male and female leaving in high spirits in a convertible with a sign above them entitled "JAYCEE CONVENTION DELEGATES" while a man named John Q. Public, which was one of Shanks' well known characters that depicted the average American taxpayer, is holding scrolls for large plans that were to be coming to Buffalo within the next ten years.²³ This is referring to the Junior Chamber of Commerce Convention that was held in Buffalo in June 1959, which suggests that the convention should come back to Buffalo in ten years once all of the city's upcoming plans had been finished. The same week that this cartoon was published, the county gave clearance to construct the Central Library that now stands at Lafayette Square. Also at this time, people had hoped that the "new thruway and expressway system" would revolutionize the city and bring it into a modern era, which is now ironic given recent discussion about getting rid of the expressways in the city.²⁴

23. Bruce Shanks, "You Won't Know the Place!" *Seven Original Cartoons by Bruce Shanks, 1959-1960*; "News Cartoons to Be Exhibited: Library Honors Bruce Shanks," *Buffalo Evening News*, February 9, 1962, BECPL, p. 23, microfilm.

24. *Buffalo Evening News*, June 18, 1959, BECPL, p. 1, microfilm; "Come Again, Jaycees," *Buffalo Evening News*, June 18, 1959, BECPL, p.32, microfilm.

// Cartooning is a form of caricature. When you draw a caricature, you emphasize the person's most noticeable feature – such as a prominent nose – and make it even more noticeable. In the same way, you take a news item which has in it a striking fact. Your cartoon emphasizes that fact. You can bless or curse with your cartoon. You can make the reader laugh at something which is ridiculous, or you can make him pleased with something he might have overlooked in the news story. //

-BRUCE SHANKS

As seen through these editorial masterpieces, the portrayal of political and other contemporary events in the press through cartoons has long been a conduit for the public's keenness and cognizance of larger issues. According to Bruce Shanks' definition:

Cartooning is a form of caricature. When you draw a caricature, you emphasize the person's most noticeable feature – such as a prominent nose – and make it even more noticeable. In the same way, you take a news item which has in it a striking fact. Your cartoon emphasizes that fact. You can bless or curse with your cartoon. You can make the reader laugh at something which is ridiculous, or you can make him pleased with something he might have overlooked in the news story.²⁵

While political and editorial cartoons are intended to be products of their time and have been most effective through immediate dissemination to the consumer, they have become vital tools for historians and those who are interested in history by allowing them to witness patterns and shifts in public thought, as well as reoccurring themes that appear to be interwoven throughout nearly every era in the history of the United States.

Through editorial cartoons, we can learn a lot about a specific community or region, along with the triumphs and struggles that that area was experiencing at a particular moment in time. It's as if the editorial cartoon has the ability to embody all that we would expect to find in a time capsule. However, everything that we would learn from several items in a time capsule can instead be found in one simple drawing with few words, as was published every day in newspapers all over the country by artistic geniuses such as Bruce Shanks.

25. Zavitz, p. 323-4.



Thus, this collection of Bruce Shanks' artwork is extremely important to the local history of Buffalo and the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library in numerous ways. In February 1962, Bruce Shanks had loaned fifty of his original cartoons to be put on display at what was then called the "Grosvenor Reference Division of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library," which at the time was the largest exhibit to be displayed at the Grosvenor.²⁶ Also included within the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library's collection is a photograph taken by Bob Metz that shows Jane VanArsdale, who was a librarian at the Grosvenor, and Bruce Shanks as they decide which cartoons they would like to include in the exhibit that was on display at the library.²⁷

Moreover, given the publication of three editorial cartoon reviews that focus entirely on his work and their inclusion at the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, it appears that Mr. Shanks knew, at least to some extent, the importance of editorial cartoons in providing context that would allow others later on to better grasp what was occurring on that day or at that moment in history that the cartoon was illustrated. Paul M. Rooney, who at the time was the director of the Buffalo Library, even stated on the library's inclusion of Shanks' 1964 – *Cartoon Review* soon after its publication:

I have always been an admirer of Bruce Shanks' daily cartoon and I'm pleased that a collection of his works is available to the public. One of the highlights of the opening of the library was an exhibit of Mr. Shanks' original drawings. It was a hit with all who saw it and I'm sure his book will be accepted just as well. This particular collection should be a welcome addition to any library and in years to come, will provide the reader with an interesting, quick review of important events of 1964.²⁸

The people of the city of Buffalo and the surrounding areas that make up Erie County are very fortunate to have the Bruce Shanks Collection at the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library and that the community has direct access to one of the most prolific political cartoonists of his time. Nevertheless, not many people know about Bruce Shanks or how important his work was in contributing to the social and political culture that existed throughout the mid-twentieth century. Due to this city's strong and proud connection to world-renowned editorial cartoonists, which includes the likes of Mr. Shanks, fellow Pulitzer Prize-winner Tom Toles, and National Press Foundation award winner Adam Zyglis, all of whom are or at one time were editorial cartoonists for the *Buffalo News*, it is our obligation to embrace the Bruce Shanks Political Cartoon Collections as a valuable cultural and historical treasure and help make its transition from near obscurity to local prominence a reality.

26. "News Cartoons to Be Exhibited." *Buffalo Evening News*, February 9, 1966, BECPL, p.23, microfilm.

27. Bob Metz, "Jane VanArsdale and Bruce Shanks," February 9, 1962, original in Buffalo and Erie County Public Library Archives Collection, used in "News Cartoons to Be Exhibited," *Buffalo Evening News*, February 9, 1962, p. 23.

28. "Shanks' Cartoon Collection A Keen Capsule of Comment: Published in Book Form, It's Drawing Enthusiastic Response at Stores, Dealers," *Buffalo Evening News*, January 30, 1965, Local Biographies, ser. 34, vol. 2, Local History File, BECPL, p. 207.