

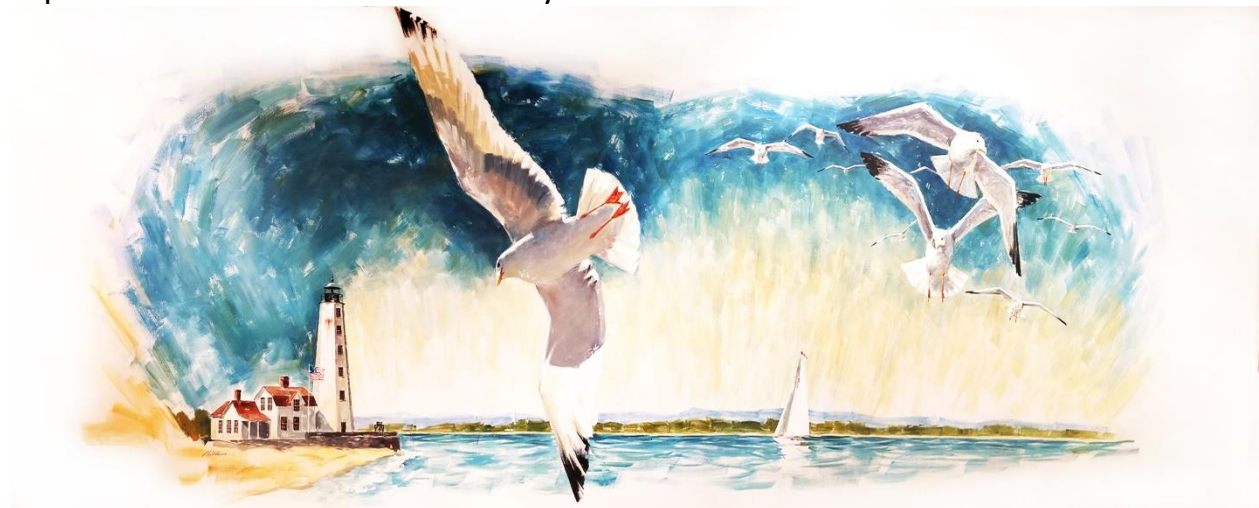
Bob Childress, American Illustrator, and the end of an era ©

(By Lamar LeMonte, OSHS September 2021)

Robert (Bob) Childress was an accomplished artist and an Old Saybrook resident for many years, before his retirement to New Hampshire. He was born in 1915 and died at the early age of 68 in 1983. He made a living as an American Illustrator, a vanishing breed of artists who were rarely recognized in the fine-art world for their exceptional talent. Today, virtually all of them are gone, replaced by specialists in digital photography, Photoshop software, and computer graphics.



Bob and his wife Nan were ardent town supporters, gracious neighbors, active in numerous local charities, and the parents of five children. They were both founding members of the Old Saybrook Historical Society. Numerous pieces of his art memorabilia have been donated to the Historical Society by his daughter, Nancy Childress. Today, Bob's 16-foot-wide mural of the *Inner Light* hangs at the top of the stairs in the Acton Library.



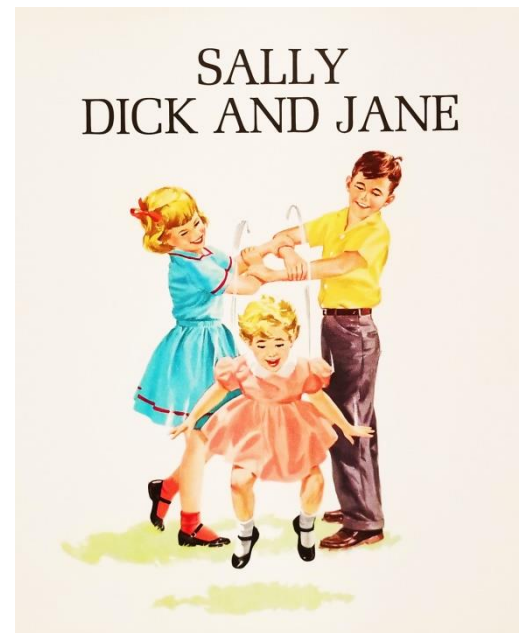


His portrait of Kathleen “Goody” Goodwin hangs in the front hallway of her namesake school on the Old Boston Post Road. Portraits of other local friends hang in various nearby homes.

Several of his paintings also hang in the Old Saybrook home of one of his sons, local attorney Bill Childress.

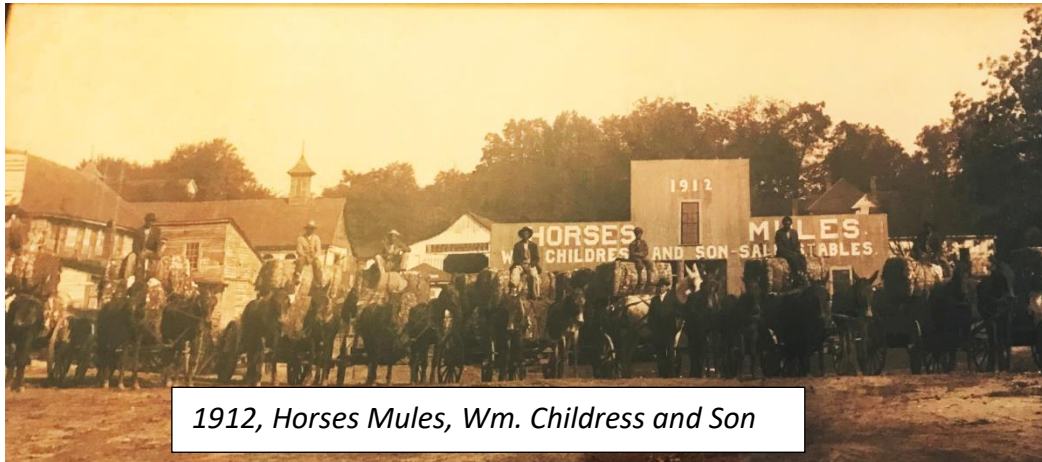


Bob Childress is best remembered for his illustrations of the venerable *Dick and Jane* series of elementary school readers. He is indelibly linked to those images of 1950’s family life due to the ubiquitous decades-long usage of those books throughout the country.



But his career as an American Illustrator spanned several decades and a much broader body of artistic work than just the *Dick and Jane* readers.

Bob's career was improbable. He was born in the small, rural, South Carolina town of Laurens. His father and grandfather were mule and horse traders and provided wagons and drivers to bring in the local cotton crops. His son Bill asserts, "The consummate artist was a far cry from his roots."



1912, *Horses Mules, Wm. Childress and Son*

Bob was an innately talented artist, even as a teenager. He did not study art in school, nor did he take lessons. Later in his career as an illustrator, he undoubtedly followed the careers and techniques of the well-known illustrators of the day, including Norman Rockwell, with whom he was ultimately acquainted.

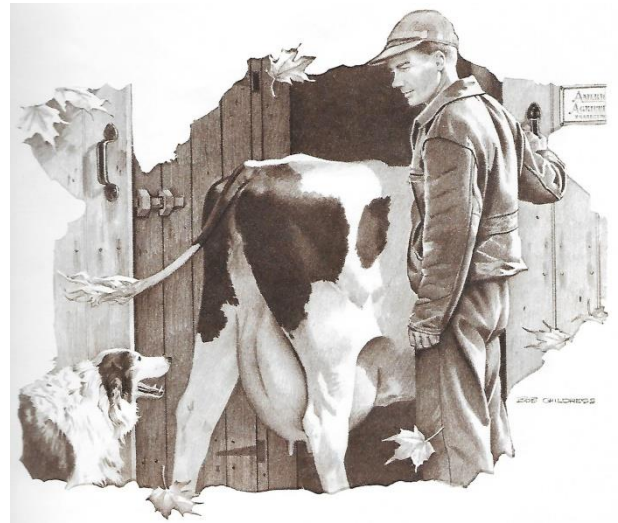


Watercolors done as a teenager



Bob attended what originally was the Clemson Agricultural College of South Carolina, now Clemson University. An early college interest was in heraldry, not agriculture, and he earned money in college by painting coats of arms and selling them to friends and local families. After college and a brief stint designing ads for a local South Carolina newspaper, he moved north to Ithaca, NY, to work at an ad agency which, perhaps not coincidentally, connected him back to agriculture. Their main client was the Grange League Federation (G.L.F.), a farmer's cooperative, and Bob became a member of their PR and Information Department. That cooperative later became Agway.



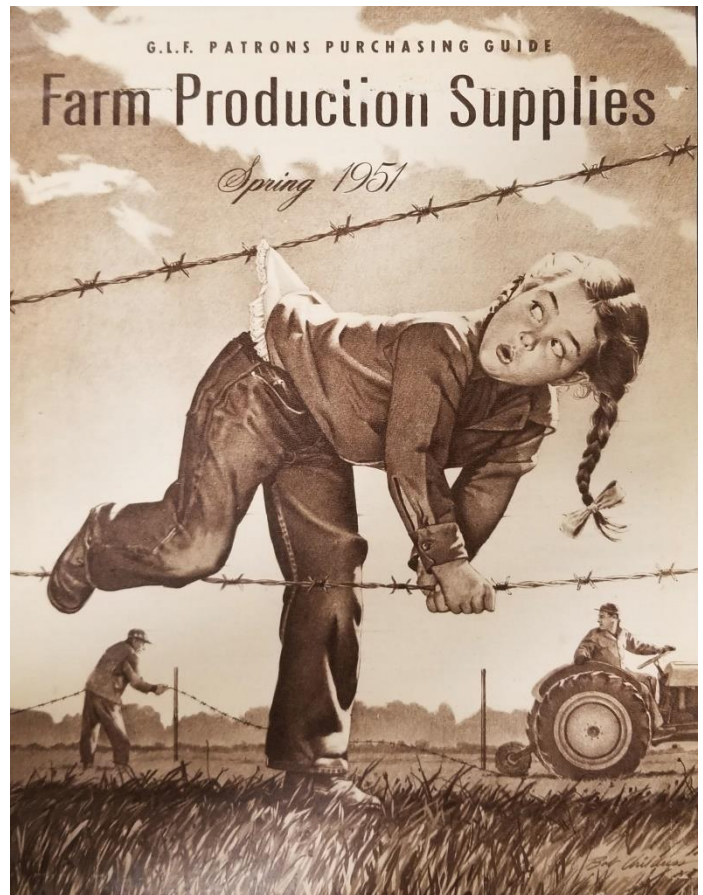




Like most illustrators, Bob worked from Polaroids to compose his drawings. Above: part of his calendar series for the G.L.F.

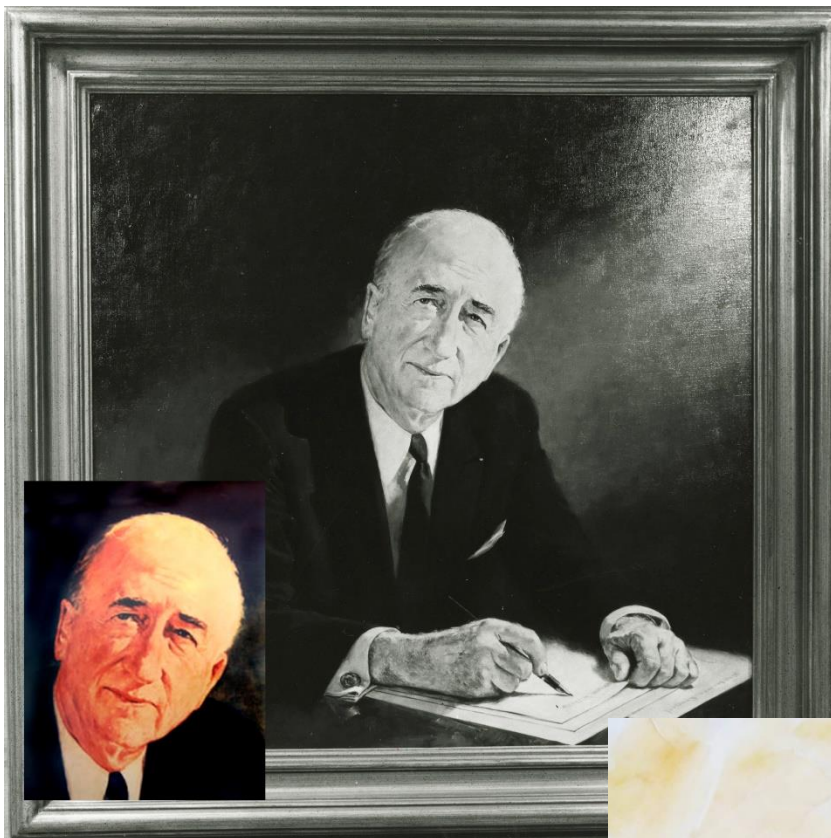


Below: part of his work for the Grange League Federation, later named Agway.



While illustrating agricultural elements of the G.L.F. in Ithaca, two new artistic opportunities presented themselves to Bob. The first opportunity was portraits. Bob was becoming recognized locally and he began a prolific period of oil portraits.

One of his most notable portraits was of James Byrnes, and it connected him back to Clemson University.

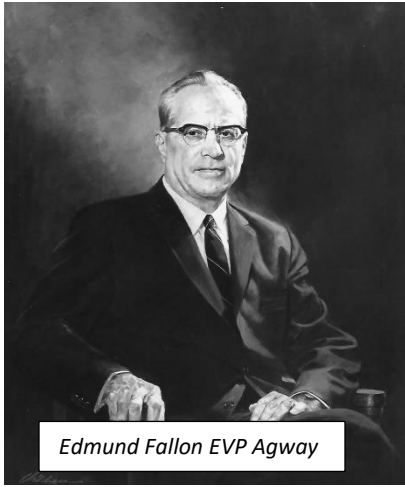


Byrnes was a powerful governor of South Carolina, a US congressman and then senator from that state, the country's Secretary of State under Truman, and a Supreme Court Justice under Roosevelt. In 1941 when FDR appointed Byrnes to the US Supreme Court, Clemson University made Byrnes a life trustee of the university. Bob's portrait of Byrnes hangs in the Clemson University Library.

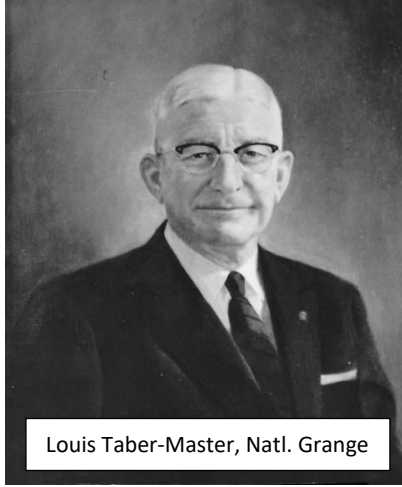
Hubert Humphrey would be another politician he would later paint. Humphrey was a former senator from Minnesota and Lyndon B. Johnson's Vice President.



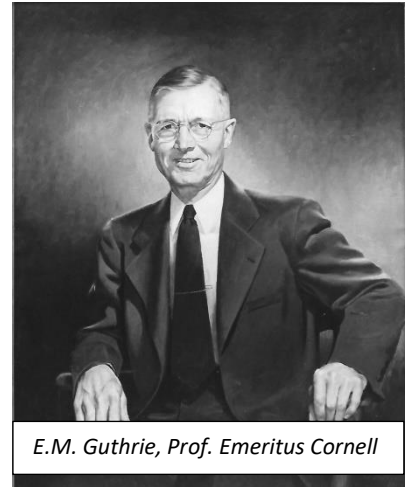
In addition to G.L. F. and Agway management, Bob's Ithaca connections logically led him to local Cornell University dignitaries, faculty and board trustees. His portraits hang there, in various offices and libraries.



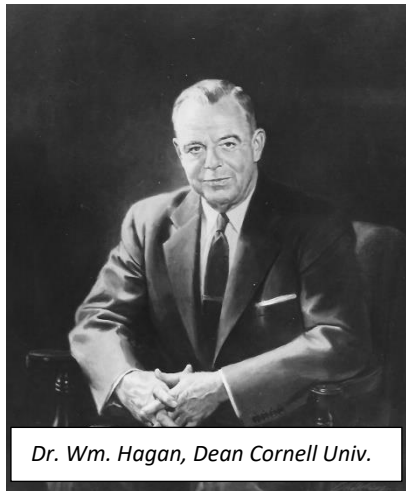
Edmund Fallon EVP Agway



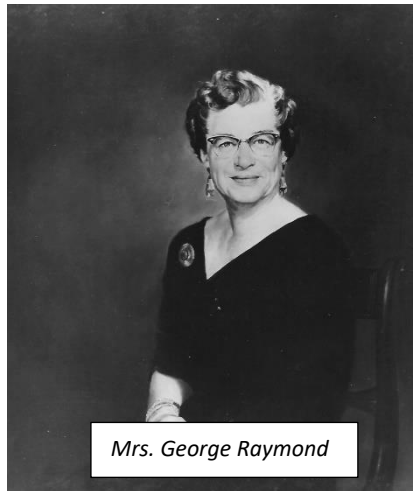
Louis Taber-Master, Natl. Grange



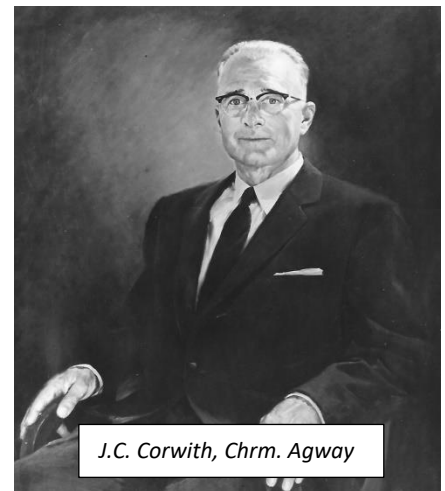
E.M. Guthrie, Prof. Emeritus Cornell



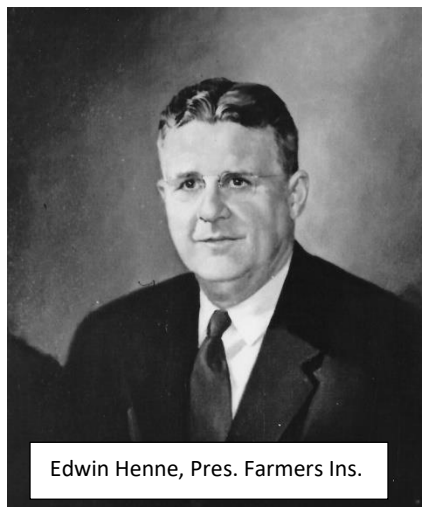
Dr. Wm. Hagan, Dean Cornell Univ.



Mrs. George Raymond



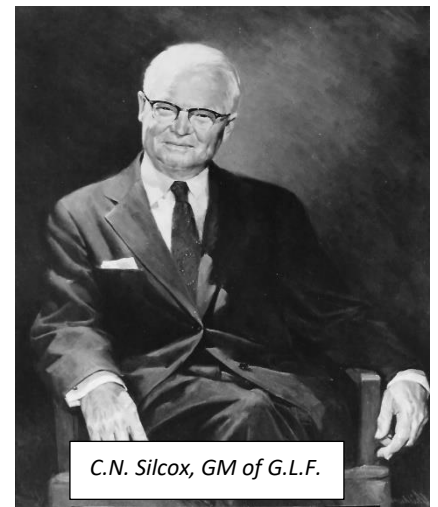
J.C. Corwith, Chrm. Agway



Edwin Henne, Pres. Farmers Ins.

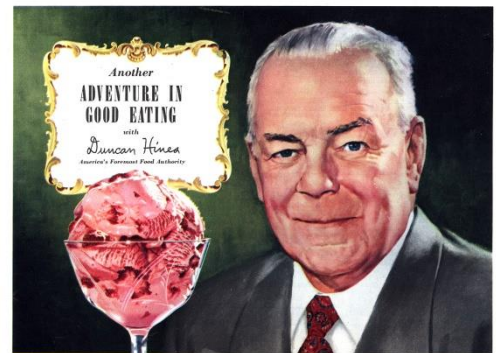
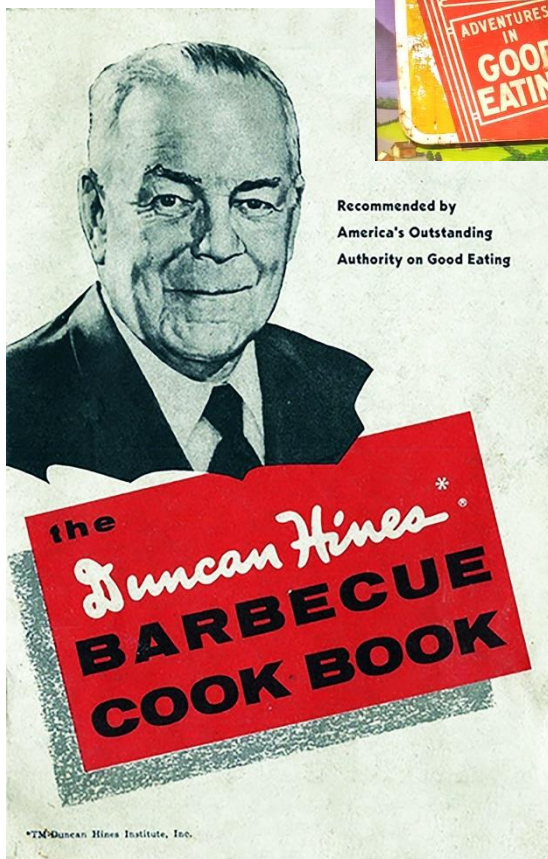
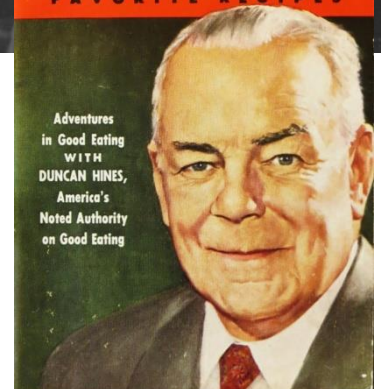
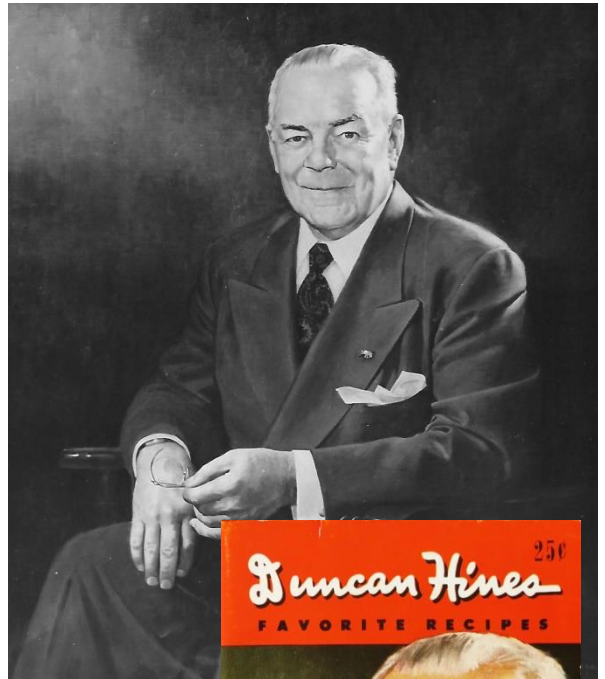


Mrs. Robert Sprohl



C.N. Silcox, GM of G.L.F.

It is ironic that Bob's most publicized portrait would not hang in either Clemson or Cornell, nor would it even appear with his signature on it. It would appear instead on cake and brownie mixes, recipe books, cans of frosting and even cartons of ice cream. It was his portrait of Duncan Hines, who unlike the fictitious Betty Crocker, was a real person. Hines was a well-known authority on food, having published a renowned, national restaurant-rating guide. He then partnered with Roy Park to form Hines-Park Foods, in Ithaca, NY and they started the Duncan Hines brand of packaged grocery foods and cake mixes. Hines put his portrait face on every product.



Duncan Hines ICE CREAM

Duncan Hines speaking... "The way people have taken to Duncan Hines Ice Cream has exceeded my fondest hopes. Many people tell me they first bought it because they regard my name as a guide to good eating. I am pleased and complimented by this confidence. The fact that people come back again and again for Duncan Hines Ice Cream shows we were right in going all the way to give America the very finest ice cream anybody knows how to make."

For a "champion" flavor that is unique, that goes to zero - for a family treat that will make a hit with everybody - try Duncan Hines Ice Cream. The recipe was developed by Duncan Hines himself. It's richer, more flavorful, just plain better than any you ever tasted. So good that in only a year it has won a top place among America's favorite desserts. Try an adventure in good eating.

If Duncan Hines Ice Cream isn't already in your store, it soon will be. Ask for it. Manufactured by your local quality ice cream company under license to Hines-Park Foods, Inc., Ithaca, New York.



Ask for DUNCAN HINES ICE CREAM—One of 156 Quality Duncan Hines Foods

Bob's second opportunity was an agent he met in Ithaca who worked with numerous creative directors at New York advertising agencies. He was a talent agent, connecting illustrators like Bob to the needs of ad agencies who were creating print ads for their clients. The agent convinced Bob he needed to be closer to New York City to do this work. Bob drew a hundred-mile radius around Manhattan, and Old Saybrook fell on the outer ring.

In 1952 Bob, Nan and three Childress kids moved to Old Saybrook. Bob started illustrating for *The Saturday Evening Post* and for national print ads for brands like Coca-Cola, Mobil Oil, Frigidaire, Campbell Soup, Wonder Bread, Carstairs Whiskey, Met Life, Westinghouse, and Buster Brown Shoes.

Now a World War II Army veteran, Bob and his wife Nan had two more children. The family of seven was now living the typical, post-war, small town, suburban life of 1950's America. Bob was a recognized member of a cohort of artists known as American Illustrators. And their era was coming to an end.

*Opposite right: The illustration for
The Saturday Evening Post*

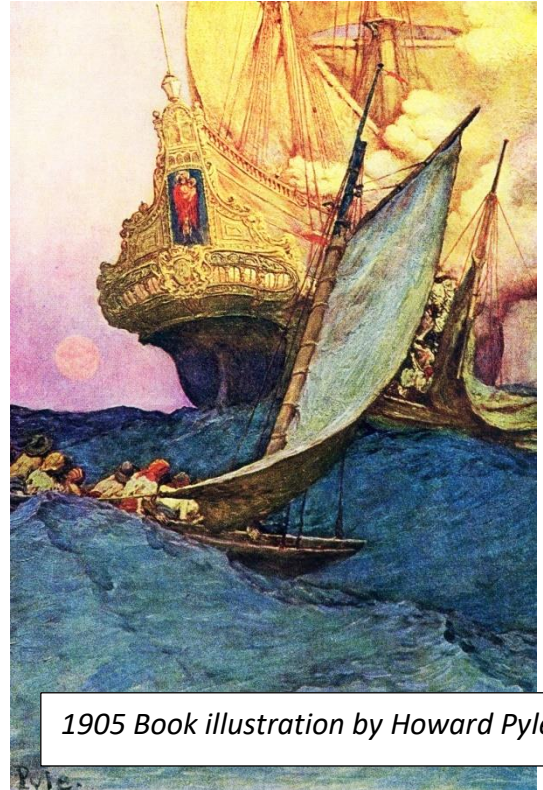


Family selfie: Bob, wife Nan, son Brooks, and daughter Jean.



The Father of American Illustration

Howard Pyle (1853-1911) was a writer, teacher, and illustrator. He has long been considered, “The Father of American Illustration.” He was famous for founding the nation’s first School Of Illustration in the late 1890’s at Drexel Institute in Philadelphia (now Drexel University). He and his many students spent summers painting at Chadds Ford, PA, on the Brandywine River, similar to the early American Impressionists who were painting at the Florence Griswold house in Old Lyme at the same time. His students represented what became known as the Brandywine School of Art, and by the turn of the century, nearby Philadelphia had become the center for American Illustrators. Many of his students, like N. C. Wyeth and Maxwell Parrish, became famous American Illustrators. Their followers then influenced countless others, like Norman Rockwell and Bob Childress.



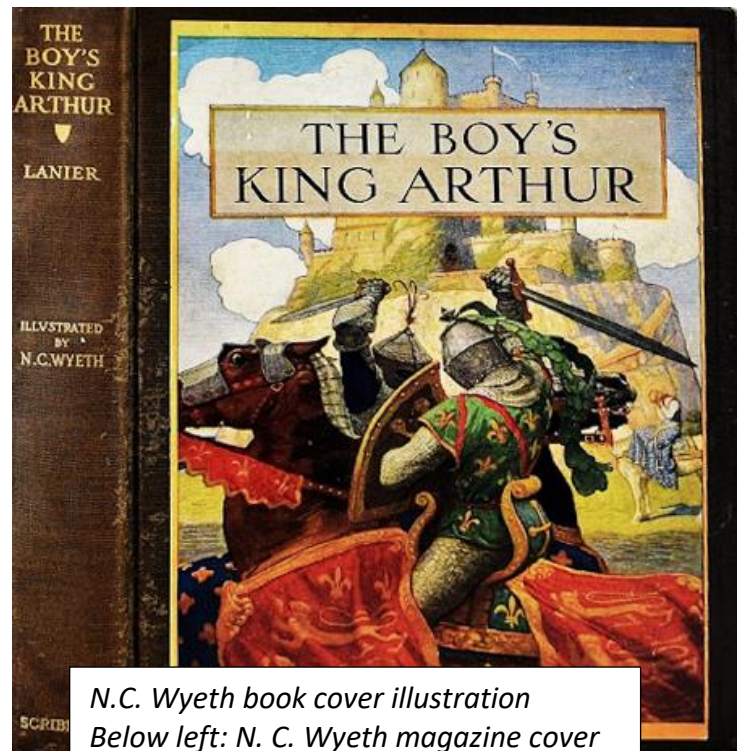
1905 Book illustration by Howard Pyle.

1922 “Daybreak” by Maxwell Parrish. Reported to be the most popular print in American homes in the 1920’s



Two remarkable facts about Howard Pyle's school: one, over 50% of his students were female, an unheard of proportion in those days; and two, he was teaching students how to make a living with their art. In fact, his Drexel School of Illustration was classified as a trade school, not a fine-arts academy.

Pyle's focus on students making a living by becoming *commercial artists* was the start of a prejudicial divide between "illustration art" and "fine art." Many fine-art students at that time were embracing the emerging, more modern styles of abstract and impressionistic art and this separated them from the representational style of the illustrators.



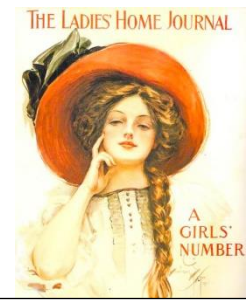
N.C. Wyeth book cover illustration
Below left: N. C. Wyeth magazine cover



The judgmental divide between illustrator and artist became even wider when a decade later, illustrators started working directly with advertising agencies to promote the sales of mundane products such as soap and soup and cosmetics and fashion. Illustrating for commerce bore a stigma which creating art for literary magazines had never possessed. Illustration art would no longer be considered a fine art and a widening gulf would divorce fine-art from popular art. As one noted marketing director put it, "It was that messy intersection of art and commerce" that the fine-art connoisseurs found difficult to appreciate.

The Golden Age of American Illustrators

The Golden Age of American Illustrators started with a technological transformation of printing. In the early 1900's new offset printing and color photoengraving technologies emerged. This emergence was combined with less expensive and better quality paper production. Added to this were the railroads that facilitated the distribution of national magazines.



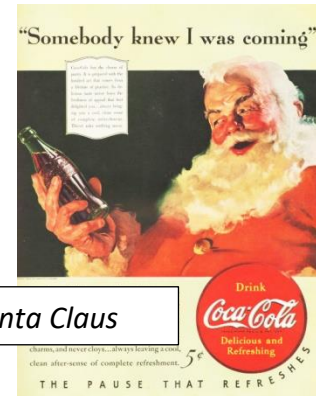
C.D. Gibson's "The Gibson Girl" 1909



Flagg's 1916 Uncle Sam

In this Golden Age, American periodicals contained a wealth of artwork which furnished the public with a rich source of information and entertainment. Color pictures now embellished fiction and non-fiction alike. Illustration art has never before, nor since, been such a vital, popular art form in the United States

Full-color covers of magazines, color-illustrated stories, and color ads filled the pages of magazines such as *Harper's Monthly*, *Collier's*, *Good Housekeeping*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Look Magazine*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, *McClure's Magazine*, *Scribner's* and *Century*.



Haddam Sunblom's Santa Claus

This transformation changed the world of publishing and the way Americans consumed media in the early 1900's. Photography was in its infancy and color photography was unknown. Illustrators were in demand for illustrated books, especially children's books, comic books, magazine story illustrations and covers, postcards, steamship and railroad travel posters, novels and yes, advertising.

Seminal illustrations by James Montgomery Flagg, Charles Dana Gibson, Haddam Sunblom, J. Howard Miller, and Norman Rockwell, to name a few, would become generational icons of American Illustration Art.



Left: Norman Rockwell's "Rosie the Riveter" 1943
Right: J. Howard Miller's original "Rosie" 1942



1950's Old Saybrook

Bob Childress was a freelance illustrator who along with his wife Nan had five children to raise and typical bills to pay. In addition to being a regular contributor to *Yankee Magazine* and other local publications, he relied heavily on his agent to bring him steady work assignments from New York ad agencies. So it might have been welcome news for him to learn of an opportunity for more steady work assignments from a Chicago book publishing firm.



Scott Foresman and Company had been publishing the *Dick and Jane* readers since 1930 and the primers monopolized the school market for four decades. They reached their height of popularity in the 1950's when Bob Childress started illustrating them. At that time it's estimated that more than 80% of American first-graders were learning to read through the stories.



Besides teaching reading, the *Dick and Jane* characters set examples of positive contributions. They did their chores, they were helpful to other people, and they were kind to each other. Laughing at baby Sally was done in good fun. To appeal to all regions of the country, the stories were devoid of any indications of location. The familiar suburban world of *Dick and Jane* matched the comfortable 1950's world of TV's *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Father Knows Best*.

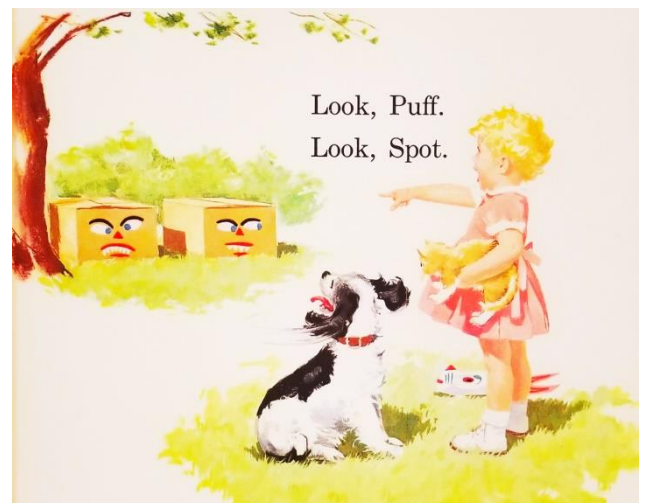
Bob was undoubtedly aware he was working on a legendary American book series. He may not have been aware that just ten years later this legendary series would be replaced with a more politically-correct series, written and illustrated by a former ad agency illustrator whose pen name was Dr. Seuss.



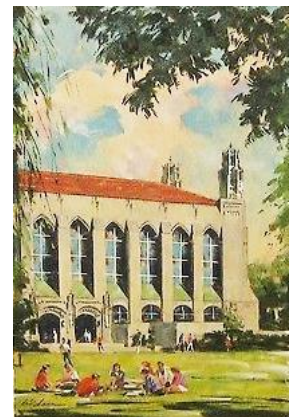
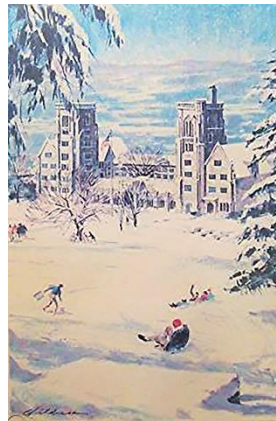
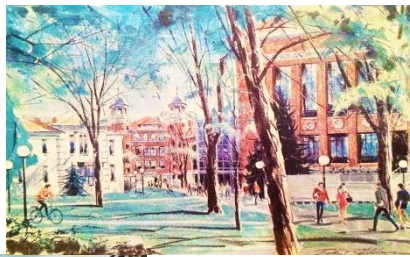
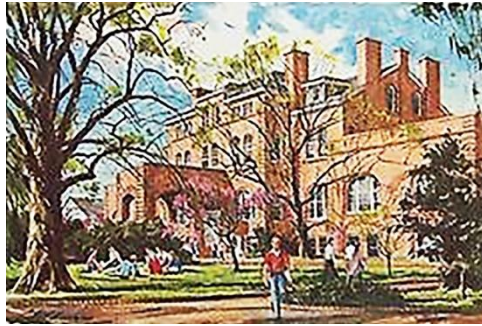
By the early 1960s, the civil rights movement was in full swing. Children's books no longer had to be "white bread" stories, devoid of drama. Dr. Seuss's work also helped erode the power of the look-say reading method that was so entrenched in the schools. The *Dick and Jane* primers began to fade away much like the TV families of *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Father Knows Best*.



Theodore Geisel and his *Cat in the Hat* book changed the trajectory of children's literature; it made Dr. Seuss a household name, and the Dr. Seuss franchise made Geisel a multi-millionaire. Bob Childress did not enjoy a similar, multi-million-dollar good fortune.



Bob's steady work with *Dick and Jane* came to an end, but his bills didn't. Now in his fifties, he went back to freelancing and by the early 70's he developed his "Great University Portrait Series." He painted scenes of over 30 colleges and universities and marketed them to members of alumni associations. This income helped pay his children's tuitions at Harvard, Princeton and Randolph-Macon College.



Bob ultimately retired to New Hampshire and died there at the age of 68 in 1983. His wife Nan died a few years later. They are survived by daughter Nancy, in New Hampshire, and son Bill, in Old Saybrook.



Upper left: Bob was an avid duck hunter. He illustrated his North Cove duck blind "Duck Blind Heaven" for Remington Arms (probably a catalogue) Lower left: Portrait of daughter Nancy who was the model for "Sally"



Portrait of daughter Susan who was the model for "Jane"

The Chicago publishing firm, Scott Foresman and Company, went through numerous mergers and acquisitions after their years of dominance with their *Dick and Jane* series of readers. For many years many of Bob's original illustrations hung in their Chicago corporate offices. Where they now reside is unknown.

Final Respect

The Golden Age of American Illustration began with the technological transformation of color printing. Its demise began with the technological transformation of color photography and digital software.

But American Illustration art is now accepted as a meaningful part of the fine arts spectrum. The many works have earned a lofty role in art history to the point where they are now considered by many critics to be, "The most American of American art."

Several museums and curators have reconsidered the significance of the accomplishments of the American Illustrators. The Brandywine River Museum of Art showcases the work of Andrew Wyeth, a major American realist painter, and his family: his father N. C. Wyeth, illustrator of many children's classics; and his son Jamie Wyeth, a contemporary American realist painter.

The Delaware Art Museum was founded to preserve the work of Wilmington-based artist and illustrator Howard Pyle, the Father of American Illustration.

The National Museum of American Illustration (NMAI) in Newport, founded in 1998, is the first national museum to be devoted exclusively to American Illustration artwork.

The Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, is home to the world's largest collection of original Rockwell art. Bob and wife Nan became social acquaintances of Norman Rockwell and his wife. Bob's daughter Nancy has memories of them visiting for cocktails on many occasions. Rockwell was 20 years Bob's senior and undoubtedly had a high regard for Bob as a fellow American Illustrator. It is appropriate that the Norman Rockwell Museum contains a collection of 213 original Robert Childress illustrations and childhood drawings.

Part of the Robert Childress collection at the Norman Rockwell Museum:



Left: "Boys Raking Leaves" Gouache on illustration board
Right: "Church at Night" Ink on paper



Left: Grandpa and two Grandchildren Waiting for New Year's Eve" Gouache on paper



"4-H Hat" Oil on canvas



Left: "The First Christmas" Pastel on paper
Right: "Boy Holding Lantern" Yankee Magazine story Gouache on illustration board

