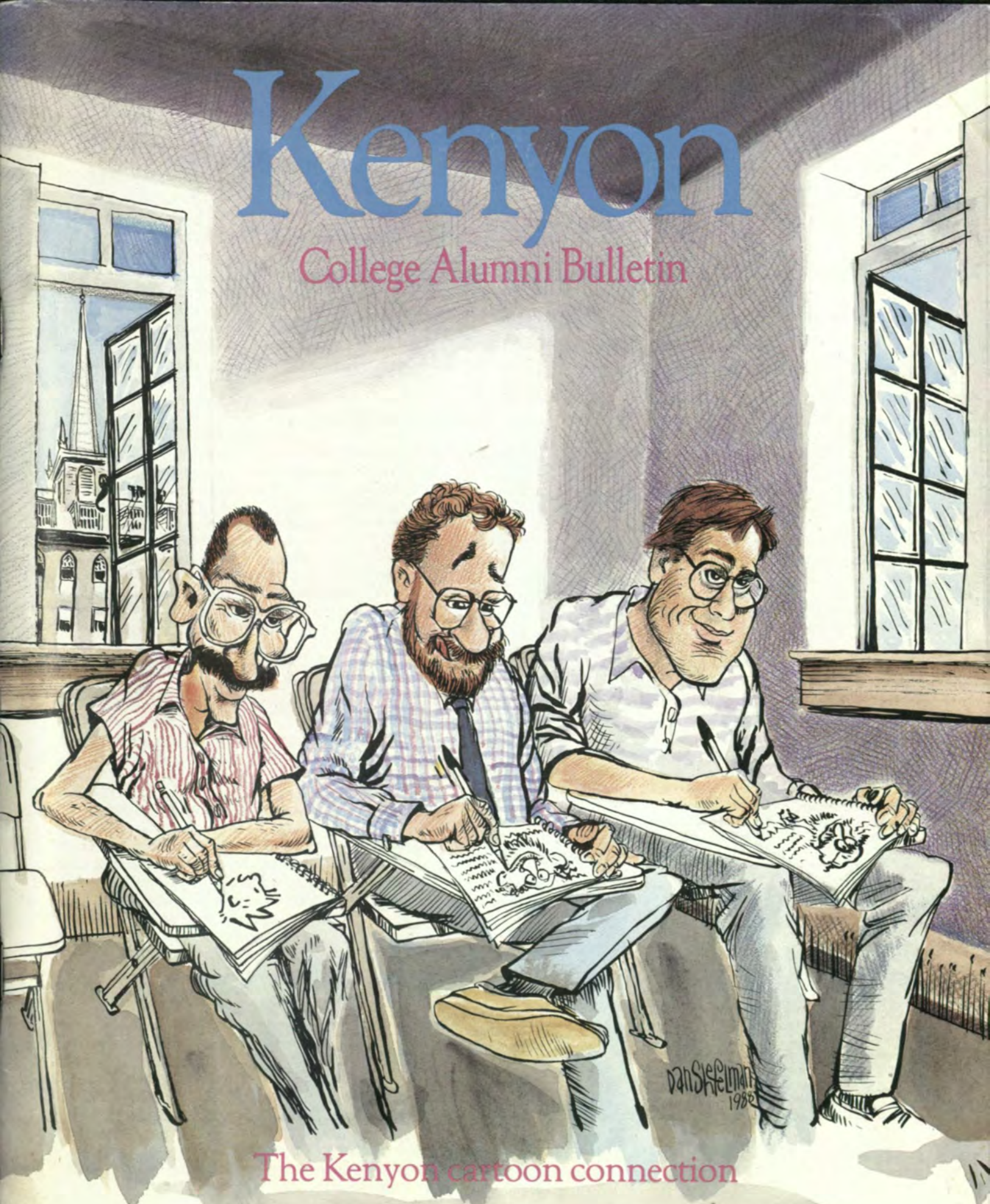


Kenyon

College Alumni Bulletin



The Kenyon cartoon connection

Spring 1988

The Kenyon cartoon connection

*Some of America's best cartoonists
got their start in Gambier.
Is it something in the water?*

by Richard Samuel West '77

Even as a teenager, Dan Shefelman '84 wanted to be a political cartoonist. While he could have scrutinized the Kenyon College catalogue forever and not have found a cartooning course, he enrolled at Kenyon anyway because, he remembers, "I had a distinct feeling that a Kenyon education had something to do with becoming a good cartoonist."

That feeling was not without foun-

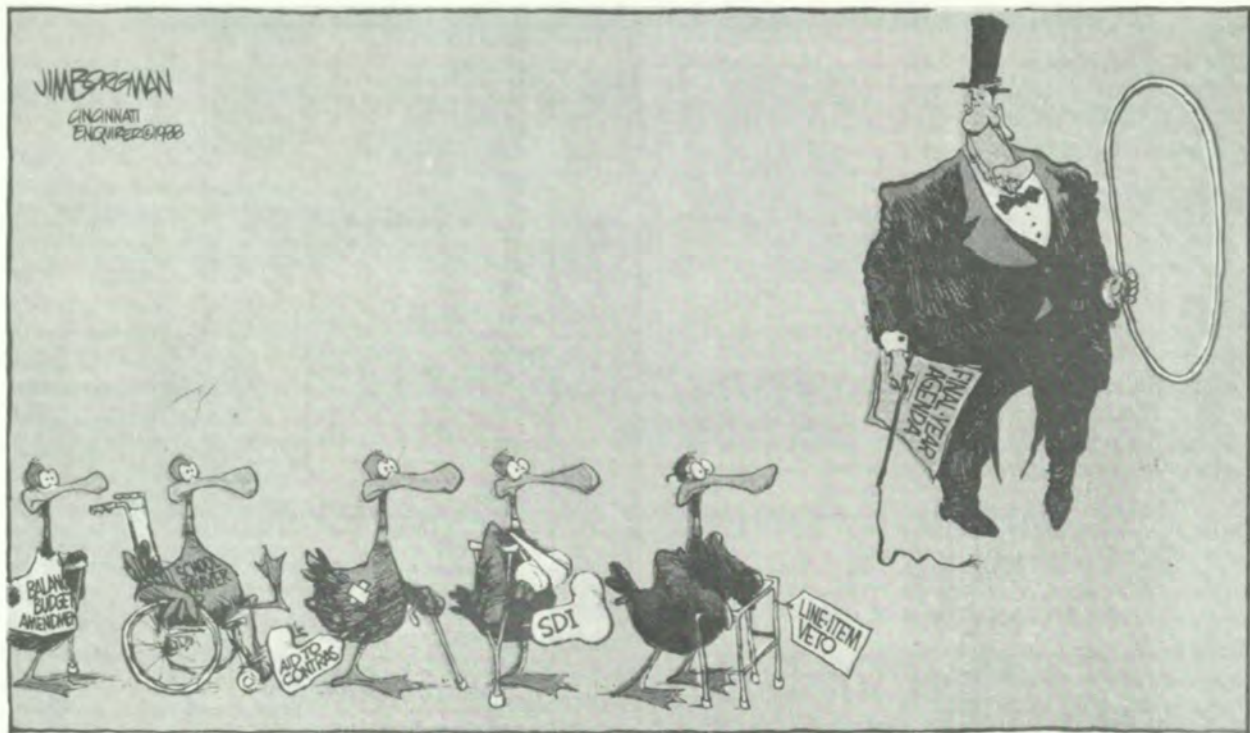
dation. At the time, Jim Borgman '76 was the political cartoonist for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Bill Watterson '80 was on his way to the same job at the *Cincinnati Post*.

In fact, for the past fifteen years Kenyon has—perhaps unwittingly, but nevertheless successfully—served as a training ground for America's top cartoonists.

The string of successes began with Borgman. In a little more than a decade his



Jim Borgman's professional style was evident as a Collegian cartoonist in 1976.



THE PRESIDENT GETS HIS DUCKS IN A ROW

Copyright 1988 by King Features Syndicate. Reprinted with permission.

political cartoons have become a mainstay not only on the editorial pages of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, where he is based, but in more than two hundred newspapers across the country. He is the fifth most-syndicated political cartoonist in America and is regularly mentioned as a leading candidate for the Pulitzer Prize.

Watterson is currently America's hottest comic strip artist. He began "Calvin and Hobbes" in 1985, and it became an overnight sensation, appearing today in more than four hundred newspapers. His first "Calvin and Hobbes" book, published in March 1987, remained on the *New York Times*' bestseller list for forty-two weeks. With more than one million copies in print, the book has become the number-one best-selling cartoon collection of the decade.

And on the heels of these two prominent artists, but by no means on their coattails, is Shefelman, gaining national attention as the fresh, young cartoonist in America's largest newspaper market, New York City. Political cartoonist for *New York Newsday*, he faces the challenge of restoring luster to the job of cartooning in Manhattan, which for decades has been bereft of a daily political cartoonist of worth.

Why graduates of a small liberal arts college would come to dominate the cartooning profession in the latter part of the twentieth century is not so difficult a

question as it first appears. There is a dictum in the business that goes, "A good drawing cannot save a bad idea. But a bad drawing can't hurt a good idea." Good drawings abound in the work of the Kenyon cartoonists, to be sure. But most importantly, these artists are endless sources of good ideas.

One less lumberjack

When James M. Borgman entered Kenyon in 1972, he had no aspirations of cartooning for a living. Like most Kenyon students, he had little idea of what he'd end up doing and even less of a notion of how to get there. "I was convinced that my fine arts degree from a liberal arts college made me perfectly suited to become a lumberjack," Borgman remembers. "I recall my entrance into the ranks of professional cartooning as something of a Cinderella story, but thinking back to my Kenyon years reveals that that wasn't the case."

Professor of Art Martin J. Garhart provided critical stimuli. In the mid-seventies, Garhart was exploring narrative art under the influence of Robert Nelson, a leading narrative artist. Both men's work relied heavily on symbols, labeling, whimsy, and humor. "I'm not sure Garhart knew it," says Borgman, "but his work presented me with a cartoon puree, with devices taken directly from cartoon art. If I had been aiming at becoming a political cartoonist, I wouldn't

have been able to find a more appropriate course of fine arts study than the one I received under Garhart."

Professor Joseph F. Slate, then chair of the art department, also played a pivotal role in Borgman's drift toward cartooning. An artist with journalism experience, Slate understood the viability of pursuing cartooning as a profession, Borgman says. He impressed upon the young draftsman that cartooning was not a bubble-gum art form, but one with a noble history that had weight and significance.

Borgman's interest in cartooning had begun in high school when he was attracted to the artwork of *New York Review of Books* caricaturist David Levine and then-*Denver Post* political cartoonist Pat Oliphant. Levine had—and still has—the alarming ability to crosshatch away at a subject's face until a fatal flaw is revealed for all to see. Oliphant, ever the leader of American political cartooning, conducted in his allotted space a daily lesson in the power of satire and ridicule.

Perhaps because Borgman had no interest in politics, he was initially inclined to follow Levine's lead and, at the end of his sophomore year, began contributing caricatures to the *Collegian*. Later, he sent the best of his *Collegian* work to his hero for comment. Levine wrote back a long and encouraging letter.

By his senior year, the thought of making a career out of cartooning didn't seem like such a joke to Borgman. Whereas getting a job as a political cartoonist is about a one-in-a-thousand shot, the odds of getting a job as a caricaturist are probably ten times worse. So Borgman switched from caricatures to political cartoons and began seriously to examine American politics for the first time in his life. "I was woefully ignorant back then," he remembers. "Creating those early political cartoons was a painful experience. Looking at them now, a lot of them don't even make sense."

Still, they contained enough of the spark of promise and the light of talent to attract the attention of the editors of Borgman's hometown newspaper, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. During winter break, he ventured into the *Enquirer* offices with a meager portfolio of thirteen cartoons. He was hired a few weeks later.

As one of the few seniors with the promise of gainful employment—to the sweet tune of \$13,500 a year—Borgman became a campus celebrity and his weekly cartoons in the *Collegian* the Thursday night topic of conversation. With new confidence, he rose to the occasion and began producing very credible work. As he neared the end of his college career, the faculty and his classmates gave him a rousing send-off by awarding him the E. Malcolm Anderson Cup, which celebrates the senior who has contributed the most to College life during his or her four years at Kenyon.

Lamponing the social contract

When William B. Watterson II arrived on campus three months after Borgman had graduated, he recalls, "There were two names to know: Philander Chase and Jim Borgman."

During orientation at Kenyon, Wat-

erson stopped by the *Collegian* table at the student activities fair and saw Borgman's work for the first time. "I remember being floored by Jim's cartoons. I went up to the *Collegian* tower and pawed through the issues that featured his work. Comic strips and humorous cartoons had always been my creative outlet. Before seeing Jim's work, I never considered political cartooning."

As a freshman, Watterson was a more experienced artist than Borgman had been. He had drawn dozens of cartoons for his high school newspaper and yearbook and had freelanced cartoons to his hometown weekly, the *Chagrin (Ohio) Herald*. Nevertheless, when he began doing *Collegian* cartoons, he felt overwhelmed by the Borgman legacy. Borgman made it easier on him by offering advice and encouragement. Says Borgman, "There isn't any better way to become a cartoonist than to talk to working cartoonists. It's an unwritten rule of the profession to help aspiring cartoonists make the leap over that wide chasm that separates doodling from doing this for a living."

"My work at the time," remembers Watterson, "was unbelievably crude. Jim was four years older than I was, but he was ten years ahead of me artistically. We corresponded and developed a friendly mentor-apprentice relationship. Jim literally wrote me drawing lessons, suggesting, for example, how to establish more interesting visual relationships—real elemental stuff. He was very encouraging, and he never once took up the common call that I drop out of cartooning and look for factory work."

Even with Borgman's help, though, Watterson despaired of being able to cut it. He remembers, "I seriously considered chucking political cartooning after my freshman year. It was fairly obvious from my *Collegian* work that the introductory political science courses were hardly making a dent in my ignorance. Stubbornness was the only thing

that kept me at it."

Unlike Borgman, Watterson was a political science major and only dabbled in the fine arts. He credits his political science and philosophy courses with teaching him how to think, how to argue a point. As for his art training, he recalls, "I missed a good opportunity. I didn't take many art classes, and I didn't put the energy that I could have into those I did take. I just wanted to do cartoons, and 'fine art' seemed pretty esoteric. Now, as I struggle to learn how to draw well and paint, I'll discover something and realize, 'Oh that's what Slate or Garhart meant.' I wish I had taken better advantage of what was offered."

Lightning rarely strikes in the same place twice, but strike again it did in 1980, when Watterson was offered the political cartooning job at the *Cincinnati Post*, the *Enquirer's* competition. "When I began working at the *Post* I was petrified. Working for the *Collegian* had forced me to meet a weekly deadline for four years, no matter how little I understood the issues or how little I had to say. That was a valuable lesson. But it didn't prepare me for the daily pressure of cartooning."

Borgman's success in *Cincinnati* was not to be repeated by his young protege and now competitor. Reined in by a demanding and impatient editor at the *Post*, Watterson grew increasingly frustrated and depressed. He was out of the job within six months. Watterson immediately recognized that his attempt to make it as a political cartoonist had been a mistake; his strengths lay in the less didactic sphere of comic strip art. He intended, henceforth, to play to his strengths.

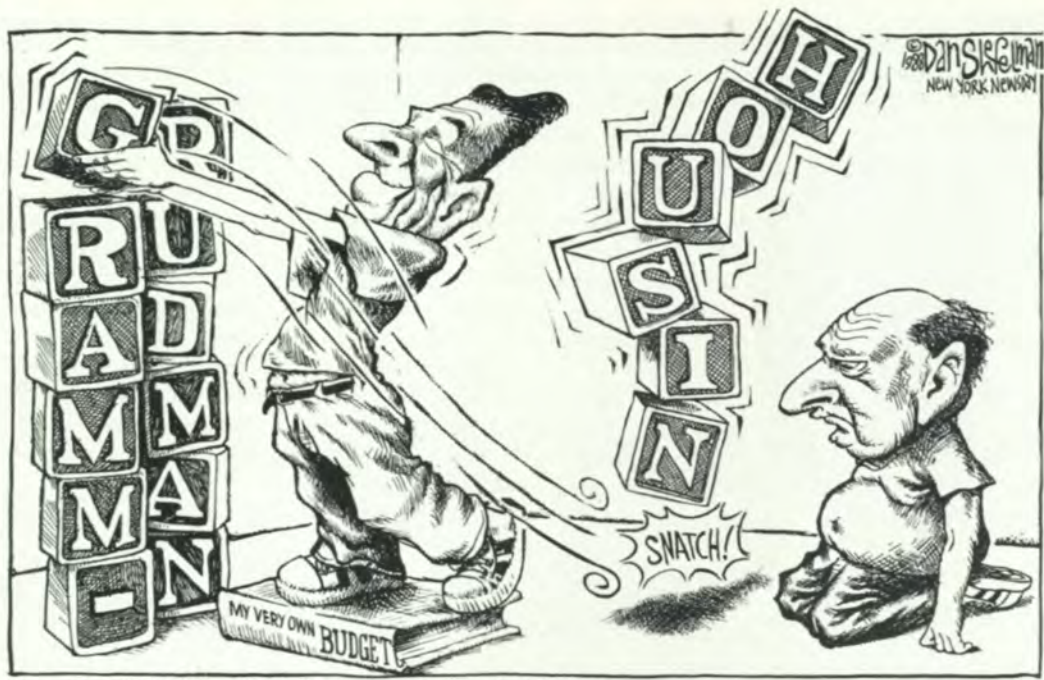
The seeds of "Calvin and Hobbes" were planted during Watterson's adolescence, when he drew comic strips for his own amusement; the Kenyon political science department may take credit for the names of America's newest comic sensations, having

Calvin and Hobbes

by Bill Watterson



Copyright 1987 by Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission.



Copyright 1988 by New York Newsday. Reprinted with permission.

exposed Watterson to the works of John Calvin and Thomas Hobbes. They have been transmuted by Watterson into America's most endearing comic duo. Calvin is a neurotic six-year-old, who lives in two worlds, one dominated by tyrannical and sadistic authority figures (parents, teachers, babysitters), and the other, the product of Calvin's bizarre imagination, populated by alien lifeforms, monsters under the bed, and Hobbes, Calvin's toy tiger who comes to life only when no one else is around.

After years of developing the strip and years of rejection slips, Watterson was beginning to see life as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and, he hoped, short. But then Universal Press Syndicate expressed interest in his creation, and the erstwhile political scientist gladly turned his attention from the social contract to a syndication contract.

A good way to spend one's life

Like his two predecessors, Daniel W. Shefelman, a native of Austin, Texas, had been drawing for years before he entered Kenyon. "My dad is an artist and an architect, and he was always encouraging me to draw. I was first inspired by the *Mad* magazine artists and then by Ben Sargent's work in the *Austin American-Statesman*."

At Kenyon, he immediately took over Watterson's old position on the *Collegian*. During his sophomore year he helped found and also began contributing cartoons to the *Gambier Journal*, a monthly political and cultural review.

He found the frequent exposure valuable. "Doing cartoons on a regular basis taught me patterns of creativity, honed my drawing abilities, and gave me lots of experience with reader reaction. All of that was good training."

Borgman once more extended a hand of friendship to a Kenyon cartoonist. Remembers Shefelman, "We shared a mentor in Marty Garhart. The day Garhart introduced us, we talked for hours. Jim is such a gregarious and open person. It's easy to become his friend. We saw each other on campus, and I spent a weekend with him and his family in Cincinnati. During those times together, he gave me a lot of insights into cartooning and confidence about my own abilities."

Borgman says Shefelman struck him as serious and determined. "When he came down to Cincinnati, I remember taking a long walk with him and talking about his future. He seemed to need reassurance that cartooning was a good way to spend one's life. I urged him on because he had the talent to make it."

Like Watterson, Shefelman considers his political science and philosophy courses, with their emphasis on critical thought, to have been the most important academic contributions to his development as a cartoonist. But Garhart, once more, was there, encouraging, encouraging. During his senior year, he developed a political cartoon tutorial with Richard Jacobs, an instructor of political science, and Garhart. Jacobs critiqued the cartoons from a political standpoint. Garhart examined them from an artistic

perspective. "That was helpful," says Shefelman, "but, I'll tell you, nothing can prepare you for working for a newspaper editor."

When he graduated in 1984, Shefelman began freelancing political cartoons for the *American-Statesman*. They were so happy with his work that within six months he was doing five cartoons a week for them. Under other circumstances, that would have meant full-time work for Shefelman, but the paper already had a cartoonist, Ben Sargent, on staff, and Shefelman knew he had little hope of a permanent berth there. He moved to New York City and turned up the plum job of cartoonist for the young and lively *New York Newsday*.

His early work for *Newsday* showed his preoccupation with the minimalist cartoons of Tom Toles of the *Buffalo News*. In recent months he has reclaimed some of the artistic elements from his Austin work and is quickly becoming the cartoonist to watch. He will mark his first year with the paper this July.

Like Borgman and Watterson before him, Shefelman is waiting to extend the hand of encouragement and friendship to the next generation of Kenyon cartoonists.

—Rich West is director of publications for SANE/FREEZE, the nation's largest disarmament group. He is also the author of *Satire on Stone*, a biography of nineteenth-century political cartoonist Joseph Keppler. The book will be published this spring by the University of Illinois Press.

What is it about this place?



K. C. Chartrand contributes to Washington, D.C., publications.

Maybe it is something about the water in Gambier, for cartoon talent abounds among Kenyon alumni. Timothy J. Newcomb '74 is the only political cartoonist in the entire state of Vermont. When he's not running his successful graphic design business, he's drawing three cartoons a week for eight newspapers around the state. Before settling down in the Vermont hills in 1982, Newcomb was



Tim Newcomb's cartoons appear in New England newspapers.

associate art director of *Forbes* magazine in New York City.

"My goal is to put myself out of business as an editor and designer and work full time as a cartoonist, which is becoming increasingly likely," says Newcomb, who recently was named the best daily cartoonist for smaller newspapers by the New England Press Association.

K.C. Chartrand '79 is managing editor and art director for *Hazard Monthly*, a national tabloid published by Research Alternatives of Rockville, Maryland. He contributes cartoons to it as well as to other publications in the Washington, D.C., area.

"I don't think it's too surprising that a liberal arts college like Kenyon has produced some fine cartoonists," says Chartrand. "Cartooning is much less a matter of drawing than one of thinking. Apparently, Kenyon encourages students to develop just the right mix of imagination, insight, and irreverence. The result is funny ideas, and, I think, a healthy outlook."

Finally, Frederick C. Zinn '87 is drawing cartoons for the *Michigan Daily News* and *Weekend Magazine*, two student newspapers at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. While Zinn isn't earning a living from his cartoons yet—he is a freelance illustrator and consultant to the public



Fred Zinn draws for two newspapers at the University of Michigan.

school system on desktop publishing—he hopes to find a larger audience soon.

"This summer I'll start sending things out in hopes of landing a freelance job with something other than a university

newspaper."
—R.S.W.

