

The Bank Dick

By Randy Skretvedt

Charlie Chaplin brought pathos to movie comedy, playing the lovable Little Tramp. Harold Lloyd often played the browbeaten underdog who saved the day through pluck and determination. Harry Langdon was the little man who was frightened by everything. Laurel and Hardy were two innocents clinging to each other in a hostile world. Conversely, W. C. Fields was never traditionally endearing. He embodied all the vices of modern man, and may have been even more likeable because of it.

In “The Bank Dick,” he’s a ne’er do well named Egbert Sousé – “accent grave over the e,” he insists, although it’s really an accent aigu. To the disgust of his family, he tries to support them by “going to theater bank nights, working puzzle contests and suggesting slogans.” He spends most of his time at a saloon called the Black Pussy Cat Café, drinking whiskey and using the chaser to clean his fingers (“Never like to bathe in the same water twice”). Having demonstrated his fondness for alcohol, Egbert shows a group of kids several tricks with cigarettes. “I’ll teach you when you grow up,” he draws. “I never smoked a cigarette until I was nine.”

He doesn’t get along well with his youngest daughter, Elsie Mae Adele Brunch Sousé; she beans him with a ketchup bottle and he attempts to crown her with a potted plant. Egbert has another daughter, Myrtle, who’s dating the likeably dimwitted Og Oggilby, a clerk at Skinner’s Lompoc Bank. Then there’s Egbert’s wife and mother-in-law, who seem to spend all their time eating and making derisive comments about Egbert’s smoking, drinking and fondness for detective magazines.

At the saloon, Egbert meets the harried production manager of a visiting movie company. The director has been out on a bender; Egbert passes himself off as a former director from “back in the old Sennett days.” Before he can shoot a single take, the call of the Black Pussy Cat interrupts the shooting schedule. Later, Egbert happens to sit on a bench, behind which is crouching a robber who has just held up Skinner’s Bank. Egbert and the bench topple backward and trap the criminal, thus earning Egbert the gratitude of the bank and the reward of a job as its detective.



W.C. Fields as bank detective Egbert Sousé. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Collection.

Far from preventing the theft of the bank’s funds, Egbert actually encourages it: a smooth-talking con man, J. Frothingham Waterbury (played with oily magnificence by Russell Hicks) tells Egbert that there’s a fortune to be made in buying shares in the Beefsteak Mine, which he can have for \$500. Egbert convinces Og to “borrow” the money from the bank, buy the shares, and repay the money when his bonus comes due in four days. Naturally, just after Og has embezzled the funds, the bank is visited by J. Pinkerton Snoopington (Franklin Pangborn), the most diligent bank examiner on the face of the earth. Egbert attempts to prevent the discovery of Og’s theft by taking Mr. Snoopington to the Black Pussy Cat and having Joe, the bartender, slip him a “Michael Finn”; when that doesn’t work, he breaks Snoopington’s glasses (he has another half dozen pairs in his briefcase) and “accidentally” crushes his hand in a letter-press.

While Snoopington is convalescing, news arrives that the Beefsteak Mine shares are suddenly worth a fortune; Og barely has time to rejoice before the bank is again held up, prompting a wild car chase over treacherous canyon roads, with Egbert as the unwilling getaway driver. Happily, Egbert gets a reward for catching the robber, receives half of the Beefsteak Mine bonanza, and signs a rich contract from the movie company.

Along with his 1934-35 masterpieces “It’s a Gift,” “The Man on the Flying Trapeze” and “The Old-Fashioned Way,” this film presents Fields at full

strength. It's a much zanier comedy than his earlier films, which were more traditional domestic or situational comedies. It would be topped for sheer weirdness by his next, and last, starring feature, 1941's "Never Give a Sucker an Even Break," which has a totally incoherent story line.

Although Fields didn't direct his films, he often wrote the original screenplay. Here he's credited under the pseudonym of Mahatma Kane Jeeves – as in "my hat, my cane, Jeeves." His surviving letters prove that he was concerned about every last line and bit of comedy business. After a preview of "The Bank Dick," he sent very detailed suggestions to director Eddie Cline and to Universal executives. He also haggled over specific words and lines that movie censor Joseph Breen wanted to delete, in letters that are surprisingly cordial ("I always feel so sorry when I disagree with you," Fields wrote).

Fields was always generous in giving screen time to supporting players, and "The Bank Dick" is cast with a plethora of wonderful comic actors. Besides Franklin Pangborn and Russell Hicks, there's Pierre Watkin as Mr. Skinner, the bank president who will only permit "a hearty hand clasp." Cora Witherspoon, as Egbert's frowzy wife, is clearly having fun playing wildly against her usual type as a dignified society matron. Modern audiences will immediately recognize Shemp Howard as bartender Joe Guelpe, about seven years before he rejoined The Three Stooges.

Grady Sutton brings his unique comic charm to the character of Og Oogleby. Fields fought for him with Universal executives, who wanted another actor. Sutton recalled in 1969, "He said, 'All right, then, get

yourself another Fields.' They had to hire me, but I didn't work out there again for three years or so, they were so mad at me. But he was a wonderful man." Una Merkel, playing Egbert's elder daughter, recalled, "The first day I worked with him, he was two hours late on the set. In the rehearsal, he apologized, because you could smell the alcohol, and I said, 'Mr. Fields, on you it smells like Chanel No. 5!' He said, 'Honey, you're in!' From then on, he was just wonderful to me."

Fields was 60 when he made "The Bank Dick" and had been in precarious health for six years. Nevertheless, he achieved creative control over the screenplay, direction and editing of this picture. His own performance is wonderful; he still has the physical grace that distinguished him in vaudeville as "The World's Greatest Juggler." The film is filled with eminently quotable dialogue, too. "The Bank Dick" is the last great testament of a comic artist whose work went against established conventions in its day, but which has stood the test of time.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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