



Phil Frank penciled early Farley strips from a studio on the Sausalito waterfront. He lived with his family on a turn of the century houseboat there called the *Ameer*. Farley, Frank's bushy-haired, bright-eyed alter-ego, has run as a cartoon in *The Chronicle* for 32 years. "His strip, as far as I'm concerned, was writing," said Phil Bronstein, editor of *The Chronicle*. Photo by Catherine Lyons-Labate.

Phil Frank, revered cartoonist, remembered

by Justin Nobel

Phil Frank, a revered cartoonist, local historian and loving husband and father, passed away with his family at his side in a Bolinas home on Wednesday of last week. He was 64, and had been battling a brain tumor. Frank's remarkable life touched many Bay Area residents, either in person or through his penciled personas that have brightened the pages of local newspapers and magazines for more than thirty years.

"He was always attracted to people and he loved to tell their stories," said son Phil Frank. "Cartooning was a way of doing that."

Frank conveyed stories in a variety of ways. He enjoyed spending time with a metal detector and an old map, unearthing long-forgotten Marin histories, or with a hammer and a wrench, renovating vintage cars, old barns and turn of the century houseboats. His son Phil fondly remembered the motto behind Frank's impassioned life:

"Live life to its fullest and if you want to do something, just go do it, and enjoy it and make friends along the way."

Stories by pencil

Frank is best known for Farley, a cartoon strip about a bushy-haired, bright-eyed newspaperman who reports in a version of San Francisco where a crafty raven named Bruce acts as a sidekick, bears run a restaurant out of a dumpster and the mayor receives wisdom from a bearded mystic named Baba Rebok. Farley started in The Chronicle in 1975 as a syndicated strip called "Travels with Farley," a play on the Steinbeck novel. Ten years later Frank convinced Chronicle staff to take the strip out of syndication so he could focus exclusively on local San Francisco issues. Farley has run that way ever since, as a vehicle Frank used to tug gently at the fabric of a place he cared deeply about.

"I really love the city," Frank told a reporter in a 1996 interview. "I love it for its physical beauty, the people who live there, and its politics."

And the city loved him back. Even Mayor Willie Brown, who Frank adorned in the strip with a sparkling crown and lavish robe, publicly praised the soft but pointed parodies.

"He created this world that was an imaginative and accurate rendering of San Francisco where no one was ever really a bad guy," said Phil Bronstein, editor of The Chronicle. "The world itself was a world you wanted to be a part of. It was a fun, interesting world that was unique to San Francisco and the Bay Area."

And it was a world that was unique to Frank. His own thick dark curls and newspaper job were a clear link to Farley.

Baba Rebok was patterned after a philosophizing friend. Irene the meter maid was born after hours spent schmoozing with actual San Francisco meter maids and Bruce is an actual stuffed raven obtained with special permits that sits perched in Frank's studio.

The Farley strip was just one outlet used by Frank to pencil his world. With cartoonist Joe Troise he created The Elderberries, which follows Dusty Winters, a retired ranch hand adjusting to life in a retirement home. A strip Frank wrote with Troise for Road & Track magazine features Nigel Shiftright, described by his creators as a man "who loved the past. Drove old cars and drove 'em fast!"

Stories by people

Philip Norman Frank was born March 27 1943, in Pittsburgh. When Frank was two, the family moved to Holland, Michigan. His father bought crops for the Heinz Corporation and took Frank along on road trips as he scouted Midwestern farms for good produce.

By elementary school he was copying cartoons from the funny papers and later he wrote stories and drew cartoons for the Holland High School paper. At 16 he restored his first Model A Ford, the beginning of a fascination with classic cars that spanned his life.

Frank attended college at Michigan State University in the early 1960s where he honed his role as a keen and sensitive observer by drawing cartoons for the college paper that often poked fun at professors and university officials.

"He could still have an amicable relationship with the people who were the center of his cartoons," said lifelong friend Kenneth Roberts, who worked alongside Frank at the Michigan State News.

After college, Frank worked briefly with Hallmark Cards in Kansas City and taught creative writing in the journalism department at Michigan State. Around 1970 he moved to California and several years later met Susan, the woman with whom he would spend the latter half of his life.

On a rainy day in 1974 Frank got down on one knee on the wet deck of the San Francisco-Sausalito ferry and proposed.

"We had a very spontaneous life," said Susan. "We did things that other people wouldn't dream of doing."

In the summer and fall of 1977 the family and their Cocker Spaniel-Poodle Pooka crammed into a 1928 Model A Ford and set off across the country. They drove north through the Great Lakes to Maine. On the way back the car broke down going over La Veta pass in Colorado. Frank found a new engine at the

Unfug hardware store in Walsenburg and drove back to the Bay Area, avoiding high passes.

The family lived in Sausalito on a turn of the century houseboat the Franks had found sinking in the harbor and had renovated. The *Ameer* was an arc, a low one-story boat with French doors, a vaulted ceiling and a rooftop walkway.

The Franks later renovated another arc, as well as classic homes in Sausalito and Palo Alto, and an 1837 Bolinas barn built by the town's first settlers, the Briones family. They later spent a great deal of time in the quaint white Terrace Avenue cottage.

"He was big on creative projects," said daughter Stacy, who as a kid helped cut paper for the strip and draw and erase pencil lines. For Stacy's sweet 16, Frank decorated the walls of a pink box with photos of her as a kid and placed inside an old rectangular phone that sang happy birthday when you pushed a button. She now runs her own art studio where she creates etchings and monoprints.

Phil once spent the night with his dad on a 100-year-old houseboat as a tug pulled it across the Bay under a full moon. The boat had been found rotting in the North Bay and Frank was towing it to Sausalito to restore. When it got stuck in the mud outside Larkspur Landing a ring of residents and a team of tow trucks helped set it free.

"His enthusiasm and passion for something enabled him to pull together the most unlikely subjects to participate in adventures," said Phil, who now designs luxury automobiles, in an email message about his father.

Stories by place

Frank was attracted to West Marin's frontier past and during the 1980s spent time sleuthing out stories garnered from old-timers and antique maps. Obscure adventures included treks to find downed World War II aircraft, buried mine shafts and old logging cabins.

One particularly memorable search was for the cabin of famous turn of the century California landscape painter Thaddeus Welch, who lived off the land with his wife in a seaside Marin canyon known as Steep Ravine.

"We had a lot of fun just going out hiking deep into the woods to find old places," said Dewey Livingston, of Point Reyes Station, a friend for more than 20 years. He was with Frank when they finally located Welch's cabin.

"He had a good eye for where people had been," said Livingston. "I think he really appreciated people today, and was fascinated with the people of yesterday."

Frank helped found the Sausalito

Historical Society and put together a room in the Bolinas Museum dedicated to local history and peppered with tales about early Marin settlers, sea captains and loggers.

"For a long time he was our entire history department," said former museum director Dolores Richards, who worked on several exhibits with Frank. "He was whimsical and charming and everyone loved working with him."

"He was just the loveliest guy you'd ever meet," said the Chronicle's Bronstein, who saw his work as much more than just cartooning. "His strip, as far as I'm concerned, was writing," said Bronstein.

Frank was so well regarded by Bay Area residents that they elected him to be one of 160 20th century writer's whose names decorate a five-story sculpture called Constellation in the atrium of San Francisco's main library. Other authors include the likes of Robert Frost, Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, William Faulkner and James Joyce.

And his fans continue to pay tribute to him. Last Sunday afternoon, a small impromptu parade of vintage cars stopped for lunch at the family's Bolinas barn.

Outside the Sausalito home, friends and fans have decorated a wine-colored Japanese Maple that overlooks the harbor with notes of appreciation. Last Tuesday, dozens of cards danced in the breeze, tied on with colored ribbons. One, with a picture of gold tulips on the front, offered a particularly fitting eulogy:

"Dear Phil, As you strive for strength and courage and healing, just remember: there are legions of people in your town and all the places you've been on this journey who are cheering you on—and waiting to lend a hand and loving you this second, this hour, this day and everyday."

And the cards continue to come in.

"This is amazing," said Susan Frank as she sifted, slightly overwhelmed, through a mailbox full of letters last Tuesday.

"Phil was an amazing man."

Frank is survived by his wife Susan Frank, of Sausalito; his mother Clare Frank, of Pittsburgh; his daughter Stacy Frank and husband Michael, of Santa Cruz; and his son Phil Frank and wife Kathleen and their three daughters, Emma, Audrey and Nora, of Portland.

Friends, family and fans are invited on Monday the 24th at high noon to Washington Square Park in San Francisco for a ceremony remembering Frank. See Frank's comics and more about his remarkable life at www.farleycomicstrip.com.