From the prehistoric kingdom of Moo to the 20th Century and back to Ancient Greece, Alley Oop slips into the timestream and encounters the mighty Ulysses, Hercules, the giant Cyclops, and the beautiful Helen of Troy.

LOAC ESSENTIALS is an important series that reprints, in yearly volumes, the rare daily newspaper strips that are essential to comics history, seminal strips that are unique creations in their own right, while also significantly contributing to the advancement of the medium.

The First Time Travel Adventure
“I always had this yearning to draw,” V. T. Hamlin recalled in 1990. “And I finally got my chance to study formally after I got mustered out of the American Expeditionary Force in France. Signed up in 1920 to take journalism at the University of Missouri, where I had this art class.”

Hamlin was going down memory lane for a research project into his career headed by the cartoonist and painter Frank Stack, a professor of art at the University of Missouri. As part of the research, I was working with George E. Turner (cartoonist, film-effects artisan, and editor of American Cinematographer magazine) to transcribe our notes and tape recordings from a long series of conversations we had with Hamlin; the creator of Alley Oop had visited Turner’s and my newsroom in Northwest Texas throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. (Hamlin made a point of visiting newspapers that carried Alley Oop, and the Amarillo Daily News & Globe-Times was one of his routine stops while on fishing trips.) Turner, Stack, and I found in the research project an opportunity to reconnect with Hamlin, who had turned ninety in 1990.

The University of Missouri had placed a proud claim upon Hamlin as an alumnus, even though Hamlin’s one semester in 1920 had ended after an outburst of temperamental indignation. As Hamlin told us:

“The teacher there—wish I could remember what her name was, because she made me mad enough to start taking my cartooning seriously—had us at our easels, looking at this plaster model of a tiger that we were supposed to draw in charcoal… So I drew him up in a silk hat and spats, gloves—wrapped his tail around a walking cane.

“Then the teacher took my drawing, and she stood up before the class and announced: ‘Now, here’s a man who has a wonderful talent, and he wants to waste it on being a cartoonist!’

“Well, at that I caught fire, being a temperamental cuss to begin with, and blew
up. Just let ‘er have it, right there—told the ol’ gal exactly what I thought of her. So she ended up banning me from class. Told me, ‘As far as I am concerned, your college career is through!’ And it was, too, although I did attend Drake [University, in Des Moines] for a while a little later. Got into some ruckuses there, as well.”

Vincent Trout Hamlin was born May 10, 1900 in Perry, Iowa, to Emma Garland and Frederick Clarence Hamlin, a dentist. The MU archives reveal that Vincent enlisted in the Army while still in high school, serving with the Sixth Army’s Motor Transport Group in France in 1917-1918. When he returned to high school in 1919 he was a member of the football team and published cartoons in the high school’s yearbook, *The Eclipse*; its editor, Dorothy Stapleton, would become his wife on Christmas Eve of 1926.

Hamlin remembered that his father—who went by his middle name, Clarence—had “pretty well despaired of my ever finding steady work. I was pretty much what you might call on the bum until I found my place in Fort Worth.” V.T. roamed the country, looking for adventure and
He worked, among other things, as a semiprofessional boxer, a hand on road- and bridge-building crews, a truck driver, and a movie-theatre projectionist. School-days experience with the newspaper in his hometown figured in his interest in journalism as a prospect. A short stint with the Des Moines Register & Tribune ended when “a smart-mouthed editorial hotshot provoked me to smack him flat onto the night city editor’s lap and got me fired.” An oil-industry magazine in Fort Worth folded within a few months of Hamlin’s hiring. A $25-a-week hitch at the Fort Worth Record proved unstable, but Hamlin set up shop in 1923 as a freelance until he could land at the Fort Worth Star–Telegram at fifty dollars a week, with bonuses for photographic scoops.

The Telegram’s circulation reached eastward to the Southland’s Piney Woods region and westward to the Panhandle–Plains area of Texas and New Mexico to claim a readership of one hundred thousand. Hamlin created his first Telegram strip, The Hired Hand, as an adaptation of a local radio program about a notorious loafer; the newspaper published these cartoons as a promotional booklet in 1924, the same year Hamlin began what would become his biggest success to date, a sports cartoon called The Panther Kitten. Its title character, lankier and more energetic than the pot-bellied Hired Hand, commented in droll and often sarcastic terms upon the fortunes of the aggressive local minor-league baseball team, the Fort Worth Panthers.

While the local-paper panels appear cryptic when separated from the regional sports page headlines that prompted them during the 1920s (tie games, for example, are symbolized by knots in the Panther Kitten’s tail), Hamlin had a genuine hit. He made himself valuable to his provincial Texas newspaper by capturing hometown interests in his outpouring of rambunctious cartoons. The face and the bodily contortions of the recurring character—the window-pane eyes, emphatic cheekbones, a low-slung brow that nonetheless bespeaks cunning and intelligence, and an anxious détente between a smile and a frown—all also mark The Panther Kitten as a prelude to Alley Oop.

“It was at the Telegram,” he said, “where I had the freedom to
get frisky with my drawing, polish it up to the level it needed to be at, and where I had the responsibility to crank out the stuff on a routine basis. I was able there to put into practice the valuable tactic of working large— I mean, making up an ink drawing much, much bigger than it’ll appear when published—so that a drawing that’s good to start with looks even slicker once it’s shrunk down…. The paper was a lovely place, and I don’t know if I appreciated it as much as I ought to have.”

Hamlin also ranged Texas as a news photographer. He shot the zeppelin Shenandoah from atop Fort Worth’s twenty-four-story F&M Bank Building for the Telegram and The National Geographic, and he captured on film the gusher that triggered an oil boom in West Texas. That primeval landscape, he said, “got me to thinking about the dinosaurs that must’ve been all over the place, back in prehistory…. I suppose you could call Alley Oop a Texan.”

Hamlin had become prominent in Fort Worth through his cartooning
and occasional news photography. The stability he had found, however, soon collapsed.

“They [the Telegram] canned me,” Hamlin chuckled during a visit in 1992. “Canned me and Herman Felder, the engraver. Herman and I had this sideline going, freelance art. I did the cartoons and designs, and he made the photo-engravings on the newspaper’s facilities…. We made no secret of it, and [management] had more or less given us a nod and a wink.

“But what soured the deal was the nature of some of the work we were getting on the side,” Hamlin elaborated. “This was during Prohibition, remember, and one of Herman’s and my lines was making these counterfeit labels for—well, for bootleg whiskey bottles.

“Well, the boss came down on this particular enterprise. The boss—a guy I liked, by name of Jimmy North—called me on the carpet in a friendly but stern way. Well, I was kind of lippy as a youngster…and I hadn’t entirely outgrown it.

“So instead of going, ‘Yes, sir. I was wrong, sir. I won’t do it again, sir,’ like I was supposed to do, I just went mouthy on ol’ Jimmy North. And he fired me. Fired Herman Felder, too.”
LEFT: Three examples of The Panther Kitten.
OPPOSITE: An early 1920s editorial cartoon for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram.
The Hamlins went west to try their luck in Hollywood, but came up empty. “So here I was, scrambling again. New wife, baby on the way, and we ended up having to pawn Dorothy’s wedding ring to make ends meet when I couldn’t find work in California.”

Back in Texas, he found work intolerable as a press photographer at the Houston Press “because of that sorry, humid Gulf Coast climate.” Hamlin attempted a jazz-age humor strip called Flip and Flap. “My heart wasn’t in that one,” he recalled. He entered 1929 in a freelance-photography partnership that ended after a light airplane crucial to the venture crashed near Waco, Texas on the return trip from an assignment in Mexico: “Neither one of us was injured, to speak of, but we had everything tied up in that plane.”

V.T. and Dorothy Hamlin returned to Iowa. Their daughter, Theodora, was two years old; their son, Jon, would be born in 1936.

Hired as art department foreman in a return to the Des Moines Register & Tribune, Hamlin began thinking about how to make the move from a local following, as he had enjoyed with The Panther Kitten, to a receptive mass-market arena. He tapped his recollections of West Texas and its prehistoric outcroppings. He also traced the development of his breakthrough character, Alley Oop, as far back as sketches made in childhood. But it wasn’t smooth going. He experienced “some false starts and misfires, coming up with people characters. So I went back to that Panther Kitten character.”

He explained: “The Panther Kitten, now, he was my proving ground for the real Oop character…. I was more interested in prehistory, anyhow, than I was in baseball—not that my tendencies to mix cavemen up with dinosaurs could be considered accurate prehistory!”

Hamlin began to crystallize his varied interests and an appetite for knockabout mayhem into Alley Oop. (The title derives from the French allez hop!, signifying strenuous activity.) Alley Oop combined many popular and personal interests: slapstick comedy, boisterous high adventure, science fiction, as well as Hamlin’s fascination with prehistory. A general popular culture enthrallment with natural history had also made celebrity figures of scientists and explorers such as Roy Chapman Andrews (1884–1960), who became life models for many movie-serial heroes of the 1930s and 1940s.
“Now, it helped that I’d been a big-time admirer of science fiction all along,” Hamlin said. “Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* and its movie version [of 1925], and H.G. Wells, Jules Verne—you get the picture. First, with what became *Oop*, came the idea of a dinosaur cartoon. Then, the caveman and his tribe of friends and antagonists. Got to have antagonisms or there can’t be any comedy. Then, finally, the time-travel gimmick, which was suggested by my wife, Dorothy, and became the overriding element for the long stretch.”

He scrapped a year’s worth of a prototype feature, *Oop the Mighty*, in 1930, but in 1931 sold a retooled *Alley Oop* to the Bonnett–Brown Syndicate. The strip debuted on December 5, 1932.

Riding high with such a hopeful start for *Alley Oop*, Hamlin heard a popular novelty song called “Laughing at the Funnies” by Ruby Newman & His Ritz–Carlton Hotel Orchestra. The lyric inventories such comic strips as Sidney Smith’s *The Gumps*, George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*, and Rube Goldberg’s *Boob McNutt*.

“Heard that song on the radio,” Hamlin said, “and I told myself, ‘Some day, they’re going to do a song about my character.’” Twenty-eight years later, the Hollywood Argyles’s recording of Dallas Frazier’s “Alley Oop” became a No. 1 hit on *Billboard* magazine’s *Hot 100* chart, scoring in the categories of rock

*RIGHT: The peripatetic Dorothy and V. T. eating lunch al fresco in the southwest.*
‘n’ roll, R&B, and C&W. (Hamlin used a courtesy royalty to purchase a sporty roadster.)

Bonnett–Brown, however, collapsed a few months later in 1933, during one of the Depression years’ darker stretches.

“Disappointment is putting it too mildly,” Hamlin recalled. “But that proved to be the best practical lesson: Get your stuff in print, no matter how little the pay or how small the circulation.

“I just kind of gave up on Oop,” he added. Hamlin had kept his newsroom job. Then he found the feature in unexpected demand.

“What I didn’t count on,” he said, “was that Oop had made enough of a hit in the litter newspapers that the bigger syndicates were out looking for him.” A representative of Newspaper Enterprise Association tracked Hamlin to a favorite fishing retreat; the first NEA Oop appeared on August 7, 1933, and a Sunday Oop page began on September 9, 1934, the year V. T., Dorothy, and little Theodora moved to Sarasota, Florida.

While working as a photographer in 1928 at the Houston Press, Hamlin had made a favorable impression upon Herbert W. Walker, president–to–be of NEA. Walker remained in charge until his death in 1967, a champion of Hamlin’s vision throughout.

“I came back to [visit] Fort Worth after Oop got to going pretty good,” Hamlin remembered. “...even dropped in on Jimmy North, the guy who had fired me. His greeting was like, ‘Well, I sure as hell kicked you upstairs, didn’t I?’ To which I replied, ‘Well, it sure was a roundabout way of gettin’ upstairs!’”

Alley Oop adventured in the prehistoric land called Moo—Hamlin’s pun on the acronym of the University of Missouri: MU. Oop, a cantankerous but friendly and outgoing cuss, commingled with the likes of a voluptuous girlfriend, Ooola, who was modeled after Dorothy Hamlin; a rascal–turned–sidekick named Foozy, predisposed to speaking in rhyming couplets; oafish and self-important King Guzzle and Queen Umpateedle; and a treacherous geezer of a tribal shaman, the Grand Wizer.

In the Sunday-page sidebar, Hamlin enjoyed incorporating factual scientific information. One such companion series, Diny’s Family Album, takes its title from Alley Oop’s pet dinosaur. Although Diny had originated as an imaginary creature, its aspect foreshadowed the real-world discovery of the Acrocanthosaurus, or high-spined lizard, in Oklahoma and Texas. Hamlin also caricatured many known specimens.

“I made ’em funny and scary,” Hamlin said. “I always had the color man make ’em bright like, ‘Well, I sure as hell kicked you upstairs, didn’t I?’ To which I replied, ‘Well, it sure was a roundabout way of gettin’ upstairs!’”

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Alley Oop
red or purple or green, so they’d show up. Who knows what color they were, anyway?” (Science has more recently embraced the idea of multicolored dinosaurs.)

The prehistoric setting sufficed until 1939 when Dorothy Hamlin appealed to V.T.’s love of science fiction and suggested time travel become a pivotal element in Alley Oop. “Should’ve thought of that myself, on account of my fondness for H.G. Wells and The Time Machine, and for what Phil Nowlan and Dick Calkins had done [in 1929] with Buck Rogers. Of course, Buck Rogers went strictly into a distant future, so we goosed the ante on time travel with Oop and his egghead scientist pals, who could dart back and forth from prehistory to present times to any ol’ time at all.”

The idea “took some selling to persuade the syndicate,” Hamlin said. “NEA was skittish at first about H.G. Wells’s lawyers comin’ after us if it looked like a takeoff on The Time Machine.”

But once in place and unchallenged, Hamlin’s time-tripping device broadened the popular appeal as assuredly as it expanded the cast and the scope. At its mid-century peak of popularity, Alley Oop commanded space in approximately eight hundred newspapers; NEA dealt primarily with small-market newspapers and with lesser newspapers in larger cities. Hamlin’s former base, the Star–Telegram of Fort Worth, could not carry Oop because the smaller Fort Worth Press had prior claim on NEAs features.
The transition to time travel in 1939 opened immediate possibilities for adventure; Oop’s inaugural encounter with a railroad train suggests the headlong frenzy of a Fleischer Bros. *Popeye* cartoon. Hamlin relished such settings as the Trojan War, the Crusades, the Southern and Western frontiers of 19th-century America, and 18th-century sea piracy. The change also introduced the time-tampering scientists Dr. Wonmug (as in *One–Mug*, or *Ein-stein*), an ill-tempered descendant of Moo’s Grand Wizer; and G. Oscar Boom, whose opportunistic nature would lend counterweight to Alley Oop’s essentially trusting innocence. Hamlin said he based Boom upon Conan Doyle’s Prof. Challenger, from *The Lost World*—a contradictory mixture of heroism and wicked cowardice. Hamlin lent conviction to the time machine with a clean and efficient steely design and a formidable array of dials and gauges.

Hamlin stood only about five-foot-five, but he was sturdily built, with wide shoulders and muscular arms. He chuckled at George Turner’s suggestion that Hamlin had caricatured himself in Alley Oop. The cartoonist often traveled with David Graue, who had become Hamlin’s assistant in 1950. Graue remained at work in an auto-trailer studio while Hamlin visited in the newsroom. “I keep Graue shackled to the drawing board,” Hamlin joked during a stopover in 1968. “He’s been drawing the dailies since 1966, anyhow.”
ABOVE: In this January 7, 1941 daily, Hamlin cleverly addresses readers' questions about how characters from different time periods and parts of the world understand each other.
Graue, a contributing writer and capable mimic of Hamlin's drawing style, had become restless as a contractual employee of Hamlin (and not of the syndicate) and at length pressed NEA to sign him as an independent talent. As an estrangement developed between the artists and Hamlin's vision began to fail, the men developed a habit of communicating only by mail through NEA's offices in Chicago. Never mind that both resided in Sarasota.

Hamlin spoke of his gradual departure from *Alley Oop* as a retirement. His involvement had dwindled to nil by the spring of 1973. Graue carried on, to be joined in 1991 by Jack Bender as illustrator for the long term. The present day's *Alley Oop* is written by Carole Bender (Jack's wife), with a Hamlin-style narrative sensibility, sustained by humorous and suspenseful action—in striking contrast with the gag-a-day norm for newspaper comics.

Hamlin had believed that *Alley Oop* would become a casualty of a general decline of the adventure strip. “Let me put it this way,” he said in 1969. “When I'm gone, they won't bother to look for a replacement.” He paused, then: “People are no longer interested in dinosaurs or history.”

And yet *Alley Oop* is one of the few adventure strips to have survived, and to have adapted to shrunken space. Hamlin could not have known that coming generations would recapture a fascination with prehistoric life. We mentioned *Jurassic Park* to Hamlin during our final visit with him: Michael Crichton's bestselling novel of dinosaurs at large in modern times was in development as a motion picture by Steven Spielberg.

“Never heard of it,” Hamlin said. “Couldn't watch it if I wanted to.”


In 1995 *Alley Oop* was feted with a commemorative postage stamp, one of twenty "Comic Strip Classics" from the United States Postal Service.

Michael H. Price is lead author of the Forgotten Horrors series of motion-picture encyclopedias. His new graphic novel is Carnival of Souls & Further Crepuscular Peculiarities, with Todd Camp.
LEFT: Detail of full page of comics from the Lowell (Massachusetts) Sun, January 7, 1941, with Alley Oop, E. C. Segar’s Popeye, Edgar Martin’s Boots and Her Buddies, Roy Crane’s Wash Tubbs, Carl Anderson’s Henry, William Galbraith Crawford’s Side Glances, and William Ferguson’s [This] Curious World, among others.

OPPOSITE: The lead-in to the first time travel adventure begins on March 6, 1939.
He’s a Sick Man

By HAMLIN

MONDAY, MARCH 6, 1939

Since Dinny turned up with an egg, Alley Oop seems to be having difficulty with his big dinosaur.

Aw, what’s the matter with you, Dinny? I ain’t gonna hurt yer ol’ egg! I just wanna see it, that’s all.

Meanwhile, all is not well in the Royal Palace.

An’ that prescription I gave you last night... didn’t it give you any relief?

No, Dag-nab it, Wizer. I feel worse an’ worse! Y’don’t think I’m comin’ down with the blood goutus, do yuh?

Grrrr! Giving the honeymooners the benefit of a little privacy, we’ll return our attention to Alley Oop and see what goes on in moo.

Oh, Guzzle’s tummy ache has got me worried! Usually I can fool ‘im into feelin’ better, but it won’t work this time.
**ALLEY OOP**

**The Crafty Grand Wizer**

By HAMLIN

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**Panel 1:**

A man says, "Say, oop! You hairy-faced ape! Why don't you look where you goin'?"

**Panel 2:**

An animal says, "Quack?? Why you--you--I'll fix you, you--you--!!"

**Panel 3:**

A woman says, "Ah! So! Haah!"

**Panel 4:**

A dinosaur says, "Eh? You say you know of stupid that'll fix me up? Well, what is it?"

**Panel 5:**

The stage is now all set for a big mess of trouble.

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Egging Him On

By HAMLIN

SO BY EATIN! TH' YOLK OF A DINOSAUR EGG, I CAN GIT RID OF THIS PAIN, EH?

YEEZIR, YER HIGHNESS... AN JUST ONE WILL DO IT... BUT YGODDA HAVE IT PRETTY QUICK OR IT'LL BE TOO LATE!

THERE'S NO MEbbe TO IT! I KNOW WHAT I'M TALKIN' ABOUT?

TOO LATE? Y'MEAN I'LL MEbbe GIT WORSE AN DIE OR SUMPIN'!

WHERE AM I GONNA GIT A DINOSAUR EGG? THEY'RE SCARCIER THAN MEN'S TEETH!

YES, I KNOW BUT... WELL, EVERYBODY IN MOO KNOWS RIGHT WHERE ONE IS!

Y'MEAN ALLEY OOP'S DINOSAUR'S EGG? WHY, THAT BIG DOPE WOULD THROW A FIT IF ANYBODY EVEN LOOKED AT IT!

WELL, WHO'S BOSS OF MOO, YOU OR OOP? ~ H. T. HAMLIN

3RD COPR. 1939 BY NEA SERVICE, INC. T.M. REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.
SO O! GUZ WANTS T’SEE ME, DOES HE? WELL, HAS HE GOT A BROKEN LEG OR SUMPIN’ THAT HE CAN’T COME SEE ME?

SORRY, OOP, BUT HIS HIGHNESS IS DOWN SICK.

HELLO GUZ! SORRY T’HEAR’R YER SICK! WHAT CAN I DO FOR YUH?

ALLEY O! BOY YOU AN’ ME HAVE BEEN PRETTY GOOD PALS OFF AND ON, AIN’T WE?

I HATE TO ASK THIS, BUT IT’S TH’ GRAND WIZER’S ORDERS... I’VE GOT TO HAVE DINNY’S EGG!

I’M SORRY, PAL! NUTHIN’ I’M DOIN’!

By HAMLIN
LOAC ESSENTIALS

He Can’t Scare Oop

By HAMLIN

Y’mean that for th’ want of a snizzlin’ ol’ dinosaur egg, you’d let yer ol’ pal haul off an’ die?

Am, baldwyn! yer too dang ornery to die! who told you that blinks?

I got it straight from th’ grand wizer. he said i had to have it right away or else!

Th’ wizer is a high government official. an what you say is treason!

Listen, guv. that ol’ coot ain’t tryin’ to help you... he’s grinnin’ his own ax!

As king of moo, i command you to bring dinny’s egg to me at once or it’s th’ pit for you!

Pffiff! i ain’t do it!

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