

**Santo, Avi, Old Dominion University. "Imagining Value: William Donahey's The Teenie Weenies and Struggles to Extend Character Brands in 1910s America"**

In this paper, I look to materials from the William Donahey collection in order to explore the struggles and failures of intellectual property expansion efforts in the 1910s and 1920s, especially in regards to character licensing. Donahey was the creator of *The Teenie Weenies* comic strip, which ran from the 1914-1970, and was owned and published by the Chicago Tribune Syndicate. His papers detail the many problems he encountered licensing the rights to his creations to the toy and film industries as well as his unsuccessful efforts to maintain legal control over the use of his characters. Donahey's difficulties reveal how juridical interpretations of intellectual property law prior to the passing of the 1942 Lanham Trademark Act discouraged and restricted efforts to control the movement of character brands across media and merchandising terrains. Beyond his legal handcuffing though, Donahey also encountered resistance amongst manufacturers to the very notion that his popular comic strip creations could add value to or attract loyal readers to buy their products.

The belief that fictional characters like Little Orphan Annie or Superman have value in excess of the various products and texts that bear their image or tell their stories has not always been historically recognized. Rather than assuming that licensed properties come with pre-established reputations, we must look to the work done in cultivating investment in them. Following John Caldwell, I treat exchanges between Donahey and potential licensees as sites of discursive struggle over production meanings and occupational identity formation. I argue that these interactions shaped socio-historical and industrial understandings of the functions of and value possessed by cultural commodities, in the process delineating the possibilities and limitations for their translation across markets as well as Donahey's perceived authority in managing those adaptations.

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