

A NATURAL SUPERHERO

FROM THE DRAWING BOARD OF JACK ELROD,
COMIC STRIP CHARACTER **MARK TRAIL** SPRINGS TO LIFE

BY HILDA J. BRUCKER



JACK
ELROD

MARK TRAIL is tall, dark, rugged and outdoorsy. His life seems tailor-made for a man completely enamored with the wonders of nature. He works as a journalist for *Woods and Wildlife* magazine and lives within the boundaries of the Lost Forest wildlife preserve. Every now and then, he gets himself into a scrape while reporting on environmental issues, but what strong, capable man can't deal with a few armed poachers or a charging grizzly?

MARK TRAIL



FOR MORE THAN 3 THOUSAND YEARS BEFORE THE CHRISTIAN ERA, EAGLES HAVE BEEN A SYMBOL OF STRENGTH AND TRIUMPH OVER EVIL



THE EAGLES OF THE NEW WORLD ALSO WERE ADOPTED AS SYMBOLS OF SOVEREIGNTY

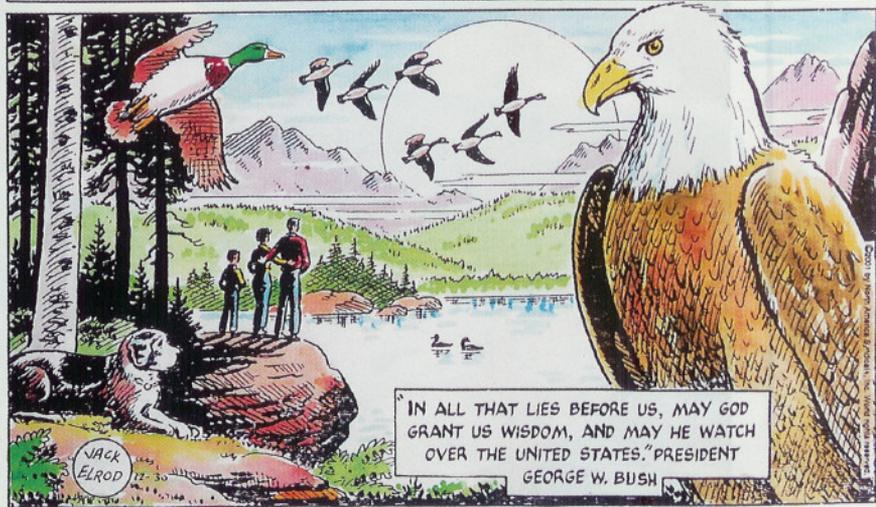
ON JULY 4, 1776 A COMMITTEE WAS APPOINTED TO BRING IN A DESIGN FOR A NATIONAL SEAL, BUT IT WAS NOT UNTIL JUNE 20, 1782 THAT THE AMERICAN BALD EAGLE WAS CHOSEN TO BECOME OUR NATIONAL SYMBOL



"O BEAUTIFUL FOR SPACIOUS SKIES, FOR AMBER WAVES OF GRAIN, FOR PURPLE MOUNTAIN MAJESTIES ABOVE THE FRUITED PLAIN! AMERICA! AMERICA! GOD SHED HIS GRACE ON THEE AND CROWN THY GOOD WITH BROTHERHOOD FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA..."



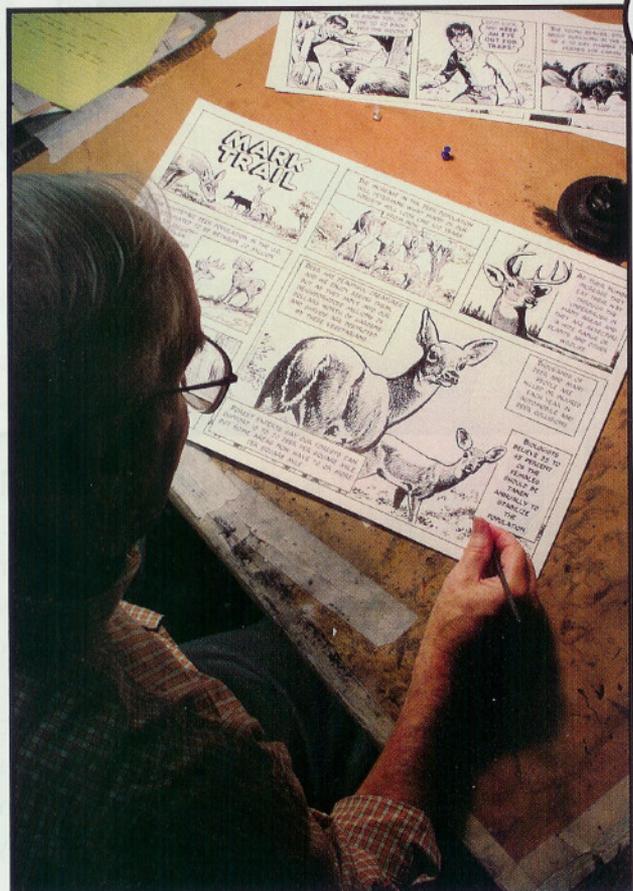
AS THE NEW YEAR NEARS, GIVE US THE STRENGTH AND COURAGE OF THIS MAJESTIC BIRD AND HELP US TO REALIZE WHAT A GREAT COUNTRY WE LIVE IN!



IN ALL THAT LIES BEFORE US, MAY GOD GRANT US WISDOM, AND MAY HE WATCH OVER THE UNITED STATES. PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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JACK ELROD



As a fictional character in a syndicated cartoon, Mark Trail has a few other things going for him. Thanks to comic artist Jack Elrod, he never grows any older. He gets to spend most of his time fishing, hiking, exploring and being adored by beautiful women. And while he's committed to protecting the planet, he gets to fight his battles in a comic book world where right and wrong answers to global issues are as clearly defined as the good guys and the bad guys in an old Western. Though the character doesn't have the special powers enjoyed by other comic strip heroes, Elrod clearly portrays Mark Trail as a role model for good stewardship of the earth.

Elrod creates the artwork and storylines for Mark Trail from a studio in the basement of his Sandy Springs home. He's been the sole creative director of the comic since 1978; however, he's been working on it in some capacity since shortly after its inception way back in 1946. While the strip has changed a little over the years to keep up with changing times, "the theme has always been preserving the environment for future generations," Elrod said. Basically, Mark Trail was a conservationist back when ecology wasn't cool.



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Environmental Awareness

Elrod grew up in Gainesville, Ga. and remembers being interested in art from an early age, often sketching the characters he found in the newspaper "funny pages." After high school and a stint in the Navy during the war years, Elrod went to school on the G.I. Bill, studying advertising design and commercial art. In 1950, he went to work for his former Boy Scout leader Ed Dodd, the cartoonist who had created Mark Trail. For years, Elrod did the background art and hand-lettered the captions for the comic strip. He and Dodd often enjoyed outdoor activities like fishing and canoeing together as well. "I didn't know much about the environment then, but I was always an outdoors person," Elrod said. "Back then there were not that many people interested in ecology. We thought the government was supposed to be taking care of everything."

When Dodd retired in 1978, Elrod took over the comic strip. He added a few new characters and finally let Mark Trail marry Cherry, his longtime girlfriend. And he continued to self-educate himself about wildlife and ecology, reading magazines like *National Wildlife* and collecting stacks of newspaper clippings on related topics. Recent storylines in the comic strip have reflected current issues, focusing on such things as saving endangered sea turtles from fishing nets, and cracking down on bear poachers in the Smoky Mountains (the animals' gall bladders are sold on the black market, often going to Asian countries where they're believed to have medicinal value).

Elrod has seen firsthand just how much public awareness of environmental issues has increased over the years. "Global

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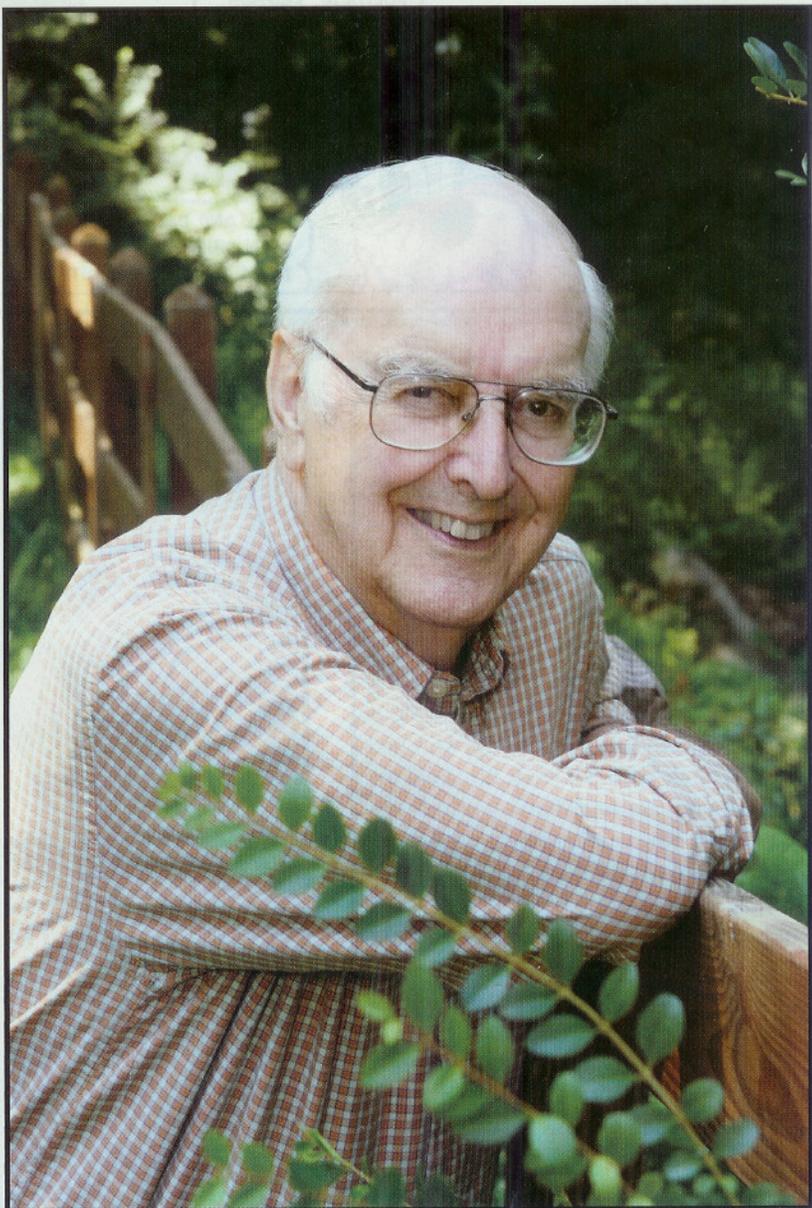
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JACK
ELROD

warming is a hot issue now. People realize what they've been saying for many years is true," he said. He now gets frequent feedback about the content of his strips, too. "It used to be I could make a mistake and no one would care about it. But now, there are so many experts in the environment that I'll hear about it." For example, a Halloween strip about vampire bats resulted in a deluge of letters from ecologists who worried that Elrod was reinforcing negative stereotypes about bats in general. In a future strip, Elrod acknowledged the positive role bats play in controlling insects.

Though specific concerns are explored and worthwhile causes promoted, the daily comic strip is designed to entertain, with plenty of adventures and confrontations between opposing forces. Natural disasters like storms and landslides often threaten the good guys, and classic bad guys include poachers and those who willfully pollute waterways. Not surprisingly, Mark Trail's faithful St. Bernard Andy often plays a part in a last-minute rescue. Each storyline is a serialized plot that runs 12 to 14 weeks, with a special Sunday strip that stands alone and is always a lesson about wildlife. According to King Features Syndicate, "Mark Trail" appears in 175 newspapers (including *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*) and reaches 23 million readers worldwide.

Elrod still draws the strip and colors the Sunday version by hand, because he feels computer drawings aren't as detailed, although he recently started doing the lettering for the dialogue and captions on his computer. "It's more consistent and I can spell check," he explained. He also does much of his ecological research on the computer, so he can make the stories as authentic as possible.



The Voice for a Cause

Like Smokey the Bear, the cartoon character that campaigned against the carelessness that results in forest fires, Mark Trail has become the voice for a cause. Since 1997, he's served as a mascot and public education symbol for the National Weather Service's early warning service, called NOAA Weather Radio (the acronym stands for National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration). "Mark Trail says weather radios should be as common in homes and public places as smoke detectors," Elrod said. He has a personal interest in the topic, having braved a hurricane while serving as a Navy weather forecaster in the Pacific during World War II.

Elrod has also used Mark Trail to promote the mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, creating educational materials that appeal to kids, like the Wetlands Coloring Book. "They say it's one of their best programs



MARK

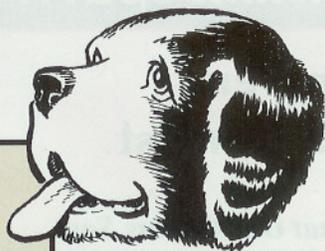


CHERRY

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MARK TRAIL CARTOON REPRINTED BY SPECIAL PERMISSION OF KING FEATURES SYNDICATE



RUSTY



ANDY

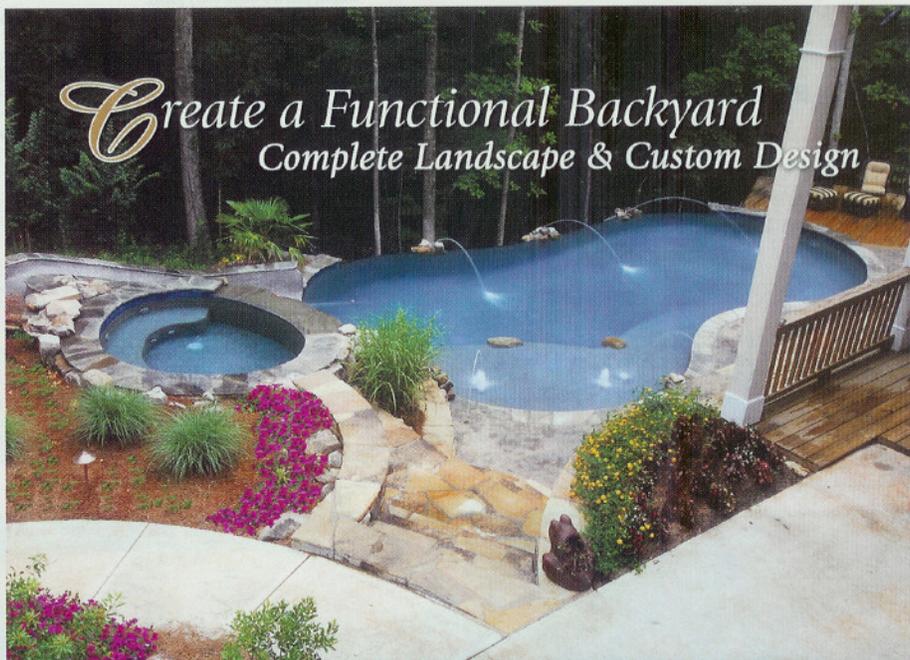
Like Smokey the Bear, the cartoon character that campaigned against the carelessness that results in forest fires, MARK TRAIL has become the voice for a cause.

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because trying to reach adults is not as effective as teaching kids about conservation," he said. His efforts to educate the public have earned him numerous awards from both government agencies and private organizations. These plaques, certificates and trophies line the walls and shelves in his office. The most impressive looking one resembles an Academy Award, with a golden statue of Smokey the Bear mimicking Oscar's familiar pose; it's the top award from the USDA Forest Service.

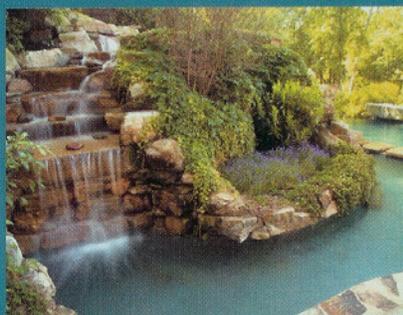
But perhaps the most gratifying tribute of all came back in 1991, when more than 16,000 acres of the Chattahoochee National Forest were designated as the Mark Trail Wilderness, making Mark Trail the only comic strip character ever to be honored in such a way (although Pogo appears as a mascot for the Okefenokee Swamp). The wilderness extends across two counties in Georgia, with 14 miles of the Appalachian Trail crossing through it. It's appreciated not only by hikers and anglers, but also by wildlife residents that are in no danger of losing this little bit of habitat anytime soon — something the area's namesake and creator can both be proud of. ♦

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