

Serious side of a comic collector

By BERWYN LEWIS

THANKS for Pearl Harbour and keep the comics! For the enlightenment of lesser mortals the above is a reference to the fact that if it had not been for Pearl Harbour Australia would never have had its own comic book industry.

Due to wartime paper shortages and export restrictions, Australians, deprived of American comics, were forced to develop their own — and did it so effectively that the Americans had lost the local market by the time the war was won.

And for Graham McGee, of Beverly Hills, Sydney, life begins behind the padlocked cupboards containing a lifetime of vintage comic books — more than 10,000 of them, preserved in mothballs and plastic. He's been fascinated by comics since he was six years old, and now has one of the biggest collections in Australia stacked and catalogued in his dining room, kitchen and den.

McGee takes out a bunch of keys and unlocks the doors to his cupboard of Australian comics. We travel back through time warps, mortal battles, stricken heroes and heroines, pirates, space invaders and golden wombats.

Clearing a space between the bound volumes and his pairs of 3-D glasses on the kitchen table, McGee begins with the 1940s — when, for instance, Syd Nicholls's *Phantom Pirate* comic books cost two shillings. Others cost sixpence.

McGee's interest in comics was born in that twilight hour when kids rushed home from school, raced through their homework and then crouched round their radios listening to the latest serials — *First Light Fraser*, *The Search for the Golden Boomerang*, *Superman*, *The Amazon*...

This was back in the days before the moving comic strip of television, when pleasures were cheap, when life for boys and girls revolved largely around the exchange of comics.

McGee's collecting career experienced a hiccup when, at the age of 15, he temporarily put aside childish things. "I went out with girls, played football, did all the usual things, got married, raised a family — then in 1979 it suddenly dawned on me that comics were worth a fortune, so I went to get my old collection out. But my comic collection was no longer there. My father had burnt the lot."

Undaunted, he searched behind a cupboard and found a few of his original copies that had slipped down the back, but his prized *Marvel Comics No.1* was lost forever. "It's worth \$60,000 now," he laments.

And so a lifetime mission began — comic-book collecting Phase II.

Among his most prized specimens is his yellowing collection of miniature comics, *Big Little Books*, which first came out in the 1930s and featured Buck Rogers, written by Phil Nowlan and drawn by Dick Calkins.

"They used to sell them by the pound. In mint condition they're probably worth \$100 each now," McGee says.

McGee, an aircraft engineer by trade, says he "can't draw a thing". So what attracted him to comics? "As a little boy, looking at a page and not being able to read a word, the colours of the American comics stuck in my mind. I bought and traded them, one for one. Most comics

BEHIND THE BOOK

from 1936 to 1952 cost sixpence. But American comics were worth up to four Australian because of their colour. Australian comics in those days were only in black and white."

McGee blows the dust off his *Sunday Telegraph Comic*, Sydney, April 27 1941. With a cover featuring Brick Bradford by William Ritt and Clarence Gray, it opens to the adventures of Henry and Nancy by Carl Anderson. On the back, Buck Rogers stars in *The Great 25th Century Martian Invasion of the Earth* with Buddy and Alura.

Leafing through 256 pages of "the thrilling adventures" of the *38th Buck Rogers Annual*, which cost 1/6d, McGee explains that "it's not really rare — there are about 10 known copies of this in Australia".

This compares with "the adventures of the funniest cat in the world", *Felix Annual No.3*, which sold for 1/3d. The Felix strip, originally created in Australia by Pat Sullivan, was handed down to Otto Messmer after Sullivan's death.

"I've read every copy in my collection," says McGee, "but I rarely take them out. They're very frail." Nevertheless, he's a leading authority on comic book apocrypha. "People contact me about certain details. They're mostly fanatics. But a lot of research goes on. They want to know the numbers of all the strips because they're trying to put together entire collections."

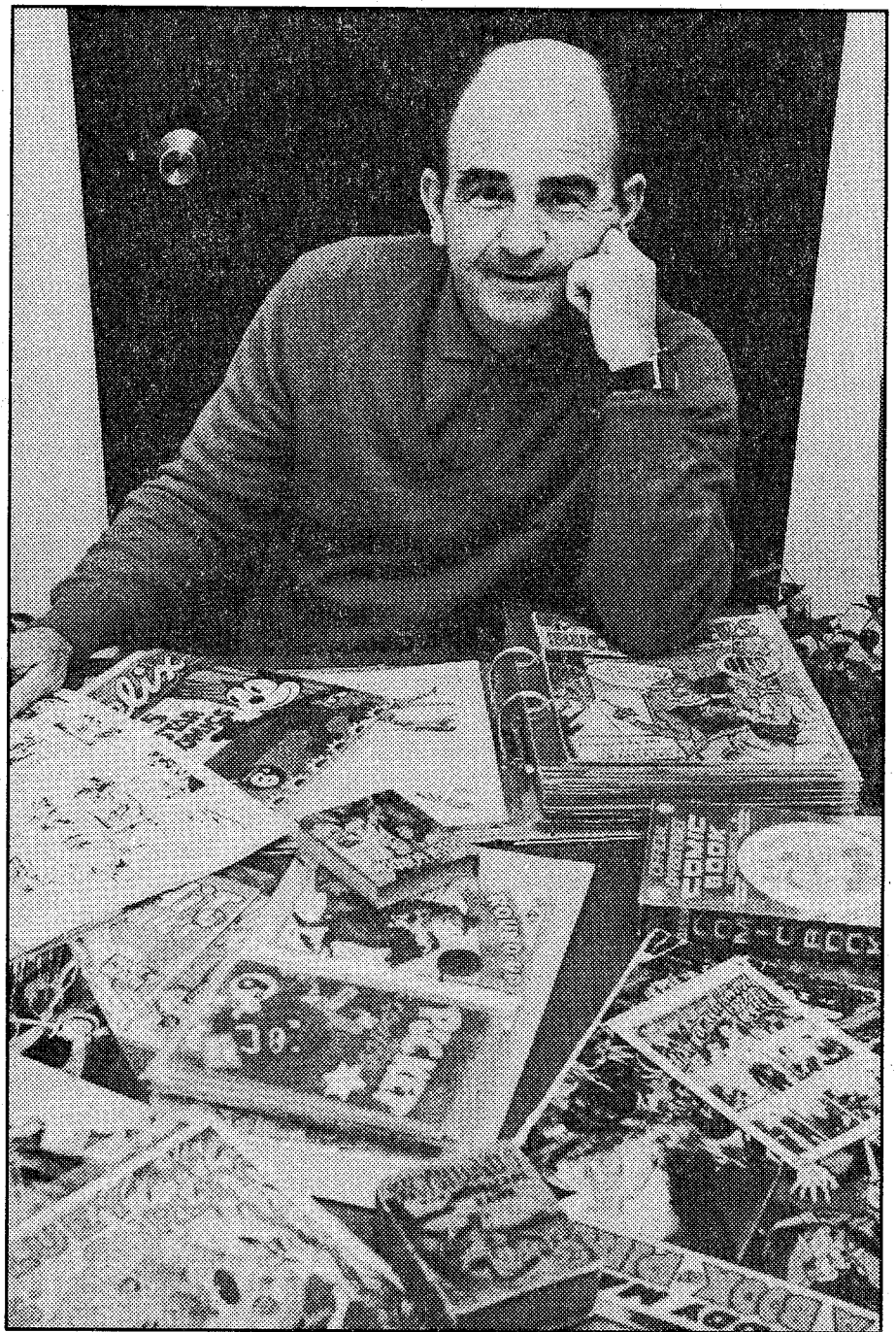
One of the greatest obstacles to series collectors is the fact that Australia was notorious for blanking out the years and dates on comic books. These collectors' hallmarks were obliterated because, McGee says, "they didn't want you to know here how out of date the imported American comic was".

The comics he treasures most are in his "adventure-style" series, but *The Cobra Woman* and *the Camouflaged Kurd* from the early '40s is the individual jewel of his collection. Featuring Red Steele's adventures with "the assassins", printed by "the Worst of Offset" in Australia, it cost sixpence.

"The people who drew these comics, such as Will Donald, who was drawing Shado McGraw in the early 1900s, are long dead. I contacted Offset and they've lost all their originals," McGee says.

But value and rarity aside, his personal favourite is the *Star Pocket* series produced by Frank Johnson Publications and featuring various adventurers, including Clide (sic) Cameron, drawn by Carl Lyon (inside, the name is spelt Clyde).

McGee is a mind-boggling source of some of the most baffling information in the known universe: "I think he was a send-up of Frank Buck, who caught animals in the Congo. Their format copied the American model of several short stories. In this one there's Secret Agent



Comic buff Graham McGee: 'My family thinks I'm crazy' — Picture: ADAM KNOTT

XXX13 by Emile Mercier. This is a parody of Secret Agent X9. Mercier also had a Mandrake called Mudrake and a Superman called Super Duper Man.

"A lot of the Australian artists drew for the old *Smith's Weekly* and *The Argus*. Syd Nicholls did some before 1940. He did a *Fatty Finn Weekly* and three annuals in 1927, '28 and '29. There's *The Scientific Detective*, by Stan Clements, and *Punch Perkins of the Fighting Fleet No. 1*."

The last was illustrated and written by Virgil Reilly, who was to become famous for his work on the poet Kenneth Slessor's *Darlinghurst Nights*.

"But the comic strip industry here didn't take off till the Americans went into the war and cut paper and printed material," McGee says. "Right after Pearl Harbour they stopped all exports and stacked all the comics in the warehouses."

"After the war, when they released them, you could pick up a really old comic for ninepence — maybe even *Action No.1*! That's why you can date the Australian comic book industry from December 7 1941. The day the Americans cut that paper off, our industry started."

And the final question: Why on earth does he do it?

"It's all nostalgia," he says. "Very few people collect comics just for the value. I know people who collected *Classics Illustrated* because they grew up with them. Some boys grew up with the superhero type like the *Fantastic Four* or *Spider Man*. Others go for *Superman*."

But comics are not just for Lone Avengers and black-hole bodgies. Packed as they were with penfriend information, they were once an essential communication link for millions of kids across Australia, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand before the days when telephones became extensions of teenagers' ears.

"I've contacted some of these people,"

says McGee, leafing through the penfriend columns: *The Jacksons* (Meg and Tex) of Tunbridge, Tasmania; Eric V. Jarvis, Rutland Rd, Ellerslie, Auckland, who was "interested in stamps and cycling"; and Heather Gillard, Emu Bay Rd, Deloraine. "They were very surprised to hear from me."

And how does McGee's family cope with life in a house of comics? "They think I'm crazy."