Comic-Con celebrated its 50th consecutive summer event in San Diego in 2019. For this special occasion, we commissioned author Bill Schelly, known for his books on comics fandom and creators, to do a definitive article on the history of the event. As usual, Bill did an incredible job, interviewing over 40 past and present Comic-Con luminaries. Sadly, it turned out to be one of the last major articles Bill wrote; he passed away in September 2019. We present Bill’s article in its entirety as it appeared in this year’s Souvenir Book.
Award-winning author and comic fandom expert BILL SCHELLY (Harvey Kurtzman: The Man Who Created MAD and Revolutionized Humor) explores the fifty-year history of Comic-Con from its humble beginnings in 1970 in a San Diego hotel basement through its rise to become the world’s premier comics and pop culture event.
A t the dawn of the 1960s, apprecia-
tion for comic books, science fiction, and
teresting about the distance that could be traveled
together with others of like mind. Great
For the North American comic fandom,
The first Golden State Comic-Con was a rousing success. Each special guest was given his moment to shine: Kirby and Bradbury on Saturday, and Bob Stevens, Earl Kemp, and A. E. van Vogt on Sunday. The cacophony in the dealers’ room was evidence of the excitement and enthusiasm of the fans as they streamed through the door. Dorf insisted that the dealers’ room be closed during the panels. Discussions, auctions, film shows, and a cartoonist chalk talk. According to Mike Towry, who was selling comics at the Con, this caused grumbling by both dealers and fans and was eliminated the following year. An estimated 300 people attended. Five of them would return for all subsequent Comic-Cons through 2018: Jackie Estrada, Mark Evanier, Gene Henderson, William Stout, and Terry Stroud.

Gene Henderson later wrote: “My introduction to Comic-Con came on August 1, 1970, when I read about the Con in my friend John McGeehan’s House of Info fanzine. At the U.S. Grant Hotel, I was introduced to Shel Dorf and others, and I asked, ‘Can you use any help?’ They could, and I did for the next 49 years. The following year I asked my wife, Mary, if she would like to go with me. To my horror, she said, ‘Yes!’ She hated comic books but loved people, especially the attendees. At first, we didn’t join the committee outright due to the distance from our home in Orange County, but this changed when the registrar fell ill. Mary and I stepped in to help. ‘The couple would eventually co-write The Empire Strikes Back.’ Richard Alf. ‘In 1971, as chairman I worked with Shel and others to expand the Comic-Con committee base by networking with other fandoms outside of our original mandate, such as the Society for Creative Anachronism and the Mythopoeia Society (fans of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis), among others. We found a lot of talent and strength through diversity.’

The Program Book provided a teaser by Jack Kirby for the upcoming Superman #144 (December 1971), on sale in October, featuring a group of characters named the San Diego Five String Mob. They were based on (and looked like) members of the original Con committee: William Lund, Scott Shaw!, Roger Freedman, Mike Towry, and John Pound, along with a sixth member named Barri-Boy, based on Barry Alfonso. Darkseed introduced them: “The little tykes! They’re playing my song! ‘The Eve of Destruction.’”

All was not peaceful on the Muir campus during the Con. Towry recalled, “There were some hijinks going on from some of the younger attendees, noise and running around, and a little bit of mayhem. We got a letter from the dean or the head person we were dealing with, saying they wished us well on our future endeavors as long as we never darkened their door again. They had some summer seminars and people had come in for some educational programs. We found out later that someone who was attending a psychology conference on the campus during the Con was a psychology professor at UCSD saying that, ‘As a psychologist, I am familiar with aberrant behavior, but I’ve never seen anything like those people!’”

The 1972 Con was held on August 18–21. Roy Thomas and Bob Clampett headlined as special guests. Attendance was about 900. Not many of them, however, were women. "One of the things about the early days of the San Diego Con," artist Bill Stout recalled, “was the small number of women there, and after a while, few women attended. Farmd was largely an all-male phenomenon at the time.” The number of female creators, fans, and volunteers grew in the 1970s. Some of the best known were Wendy Al, Jackie Estrada, June Foray (the voice of Rocky the Flying Squirrel), Mary Henderson, Wendy Pini, Maggie Thompson, Tina Robbins, Shary Flenniken, Bjo Trimble, and Charlene Brinkman (Brinke Stevens). “I never paid any attention to the male-female imbalance,” Thompson later said. “There were women there, and after...
The Wimmen’s Comix souvenir Book

Harvey Kurtzman and say hello. There were warm memories of the El Cortez Cons was period, said, “I think the reason fans have such tending and volunteering during this pe...
socializing and swimming—sometimes, in the later hours, in the buff. Of the El Cortez years, Barry Allenso later spoke for many when he said, “Those were the glory years of the Con for me. That’s where the Con was, and always will be, in my heart and mind.”

“Walking through the doors of Comic-Con was a moving experience. I discovered a welcoming group of people who were more interested in what my passions were, what my interests were, and what I enjoyed. They embraced me in a way that made it seem as if these people were known to me for a long time. Almost like family.”

—DAVID GLANZER
Chief Communications and Strategy Officer, Comic-Con

The CPAC Years
After the 1978 fan gathering, the El Cortez was sold to Morris Cerullo, an evangelist and faith healer, who planned to convert the hotel into his headquarters and school of evangelism. Therefore, Comic-Con was forced to find a new venue. The Con moved to San Diego’s Convention and Performing Arts Center (CPAC) on Second Avenue at C Street in the downtown area. Since it had no overnight facilities, attendees stayed at nearby hotels such as the U.S. Grant. The advantage of the CPAC was its size. Attendance in 1978 had reached 5,000-plus. No one knew how big the convention could become, but it was clear that the influx of Star Wars and manga fans were making its already Big Tent even bigger.

In 1979, the 10th Comic-Con, the dealers’ room grew to include 260 tables. At the banquet, Jack Kirby received a special Hall of Fame award, and there was an enormous turnout for Craig Miller’s preview of Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back, which would be released in June 1980.

This was also the year when a financial crisis engulfed the Con, caused by the robbery of $12,000 from the home of Con executive vice president Richard Butner. On the Sunday night of Comic-Con, Richard and his family left the proceeds from the convention and went to dinner.

When they came back, they discovered that someone had broken into the house and stolen the cash. The culprit was never apprehended. To raise funds to mount the 1980 convention, David Scroggy and Jackie Estrada solicited donations of artwork from Carl Banks, Frank Kelly Freas, and a variety of other creators, and conducted a sale through Comics Buyer’s Guide. Through the generosity of these professionals and others, the Con continued in 1980, more or less as usual.

The adage “you can’t go home again” was proved when the Con returned one last time to the El Cortez in 1981. When Morris Cerullo’s plans for an evangelism center collapsed, he was interested in booking conventions again, with the proviso that there would be no liquor served on the premises. Unfortunately, he was not a hotelier, and his staff was unprepared for even a moderate level of service. The complaints and dissatisfaction among con-goers built up until, on the last night of the Con, it had to find some sort of release. Two well-known professionals delivered numerous cases of beer to the pool area, and an unbridled party ensued.

The next morning, when the manager accosted Mike Pasqua (programs coordinator) in the lobby and asked if he’d seen that the pool was full of empty beer cans, Pasqua reportedly snapped, “Yes, I have, and you’d better get someone out there to clean it up!” The Con never returned to the El Cortez, and Cerullo put the hotel back on the market.

The Con returned to CPAC in 1982, where it stayed for the rest of the decade. That was the year the Con established the Russ Manning Promising Newcomer Award (Manning, the much-admired Tarzan and Star Wars artist, passed away in late 1981.) Its first recipient was Dave Stevens, whose comic book character The Rocketeer had debuted earlier that year. Dave was a “focal boy made good” who had been a volunteer at Comic-Con in the mid-1970s, including running the amateur art show. In 1983, the Con added a dedicated games area and introduced the first Souvenir Book theme for the event ("The Sixties").

The annual New York Comic Art Convention put on by Phil Seuling had been struggling since the late 1970s. Paul Levitz, then vice president of DC Comics, said: “In New York...
loved in the coming years, although nearly all of the services onsite continued to be provided by a dedicated staff of volunteers. Other events in 1985: Rick Geary’s Tou- can was adopted as the official Comic-Con logo. He explained, “I was asked to do a logo of some kind, and I came up with the Tou- can. Actually it wasn’t meant to be specifically a toucan, just a funny bird with a big beak.” It was also the first year when the Jack Kirby Awards, administered by Fantagraphics editors and warehouse employees, and the final ballots were printed in issues of Amaz- ing Heroes (published by Fantagraphics). Only comic book professionals could vote. (Swamp Thing by Alan Moore, Steve Bissette and John Totleben) won Best Single Issue (Swamp Thing Annual #2) and Best Continu- ing Series. Alan Moore’s current work that year was Watchmen. But the awards were given out for the first time in 1985 (for work in 1984). When other difficulties ensued, Olbrich asked the Con to take over the awards. In 1990, Will Eisner asked Jackie Estrada to become the administrator of the Eisner Awards, a position she has held to the present day.

Estrada, who had attended the Con ev- ery year since its beginning, had been a journalism major at San Diego State Uni- versity and began working as a volunteer in 1976 when she was put in charge of print publicity and the information booth. In 1977 and 1978, she was editing the Souvenir Book, a task she would do a total of eight times over the next two decades. In 1986, she conceived a new feature to Com- ic-Con Artists Alley. Noticing artists trying to draw and interact with their fans while sitting in the snack bar and other places, she suggested dedicating an area where artists could set at tables alongside the exhibitors and share stories and anecdotes, rant about various his obsessions, and generally en- tertain them. This same year, fans threw a surprise 70th birthday party for Jack Kirby. It reflected their regard for Kirby for his contributions to comics, and his love for Jack and Roz Kirby as a couple. Mark Evanier organized the event, which was held in the Hotel San Diego. Scott Shaw! wrote that the party “may well be the Comic-Con’s finest evening ever. Our in-house obituary writer was like party-crashing Asgard.” Such were typical contrasts of the Con: the exciting Wil Eisner, on the one hand, and a warm tribute to Jack Kirby’s creative achievements was like party-crashing Asgard.”

With attendance hitting a whopping 8,000 in 1988, the Con expanded into the Corinthian’s Golden Hall, where most of the pub- lishers’ booths were located. The musical group Seduction of the Innocent made its first appearance at the Con. In 1990, Will Eisner asked Jackie Estrada to become the administrator of the Eisner Awards, a position she has held to the present day.

Estrada, who had attended the Con every year since its beginning, had been a journalism major at San Diego State University and began working as a volunteer in 1976 when she was put in charge of print publicity and the information booth. In 1977 and 1978, she was editing the Souvenir Book, a task she would do a total of eight times over the next two decades. In 1986, she conceived a new feature to Comic-Con Artists Alley. Noticing artists trying to draw and interact with their fans while sitting in the snack bar and other places, she suggested dedicating an area where artists could set at tables alongside the exhibitors and share stories and anecdotes, rant about various his obsessions, and generally entertain them. This same year, fans threw a surprise 70th birthday party for Jack Kirby. It reflected their regard for Kirby for his contributions to comics, and his love for Jack and Roz Kirby as a couple. Mark Evanier organized the event, which was held in the Hotel San Diego. Scott Shaw! wrote that the party “may well be the Comic-Con’s finest evening ever. Our in-house obituary writer was like party-crashing Asgard.” Such were typical contrasts of the Con: the exciting Wil Eisner, on the one hand, and a warm tribute to Jack Kirby’s creative achievements was like party-crashing Asgard.”

In 1989, overall Comic-Con attendance leaped to 11,000, and to 13,000 the follow- ing year. Much of the growth was coming from sectors such as games, anime and manga, and fans of comics-and-fantasy related movies and television shows. Tim Burton’s Batman, released on June 23, 1989, became a bigger hit than anticipated and made comic book characters “cool again” to America’s youth. A panel with the cast of Buffy the Vampire Slayer created a sensation, and served as a template for other produc- ers and studios to use the Con to showcase of mouth for their upcoming TV shows and feature films. Such appearances by cast members, and film previews of coming at- tractions, proved to be a major draw for Comic-Con, one that would lead to amaz- ing growth in the years to come. But first, the Con needed a bigger venue.

Fortuitously, construction had recently been completed on an enormous new convention facility in San Diego, located on Port of San Diego land (on West Harbor Drive). It was designed by Canadian archi- tect Arthur Erickson. As soon as was fea- sible, the Con committee negotiated with the city to move into the new facility. 1990 was the last year the con was held at CAPE (although Con/Fusion, another small event from many of the same people, was held there in 1991). The 1991 San Diego Comic-Con brought the event into the sparkling new state of the art Convention Center, which has been its home ever since. At first, the Con used just Halls A and B and some programming rooms, a small percentage of the overall space available. This, however, represented a substantial expansion, allowing for such new features as the Small Press area, the Independent Publishers: Pavilion, more programming rooms, a separate autograph area, more room for the Art Show, and so on. The Con took place on July 4–7, with aTeen Day party held on the Convention Center’s back patio, affording a front-row view of the city’s spectacular fire- works display.

There’s no doubt that Comic-Con couldn’t have become what it is today without the new Convention Center. Attendance in 1991 hit 15,000, and each year after that saw enormous increases in the number of fans who attended: 22,000 in 1992, 31,000 in 1994, 36,000 in 1996, and, by 1999—the 30th anniversary of Comic-Con—attendance reached 45,000. These years are sometimes called the Con’s “boom years,” although even more explosive growth awaited in the new millennium.

When Comic-Con relocated to the new Convention Center, the Comic Book Expo
moved from its affiliate location to the Exhibi-
ting Hall. Going from an intimate gathering of
DC Comics: “The idea came up concurrent
When Comic-Con changed its name
the Gaslamp became the part of
But when the Gaslamp became the part of
San Diego frequented by conventioneers,
and new hotels, and other attractive fea-
time thinking about it. It had an open plan
of the megabooths produced an increase in
DC Comics took advantage of this space avail-
moving from its offsite location to the Exhibiting Hall.
the new Exhibit Hall, the Bud Plant
San Diego, before the movie studios moved to
the amount of press interest and coverage
DC Comics: “The idea came up concurrent
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Novick, Paul Norris, and many others. For
year, the Golden Age panel, usually hosted
by Mark Evanier, was one of the highlights
of the convention. The old-time pros were
astonished by the reception they received,
just as the fans were thrilled to be hearing
such vaunted creators addressing them in
person. Some of the venerable pros oc-
cupied tables in Artists’ Alley where they
chatted with fans, sold sketches and gave
to autograph. In later years, the Golden Age
panel became the Golden and Silver Age
panel, until attirion thinned the ranks of
surviving industry pioneers, and the panel
was retired.
As the Con grew, so did the amount of
programming. Charles Brownstein, who be-
gan running the Beerworld booth for Larry
Marder in 1996, became the programming
director two years later. In 1998, I became
the Con’s first full-time programming direc-
tor at the under-ripe age of 20,” he recalled.
“It was an amazing learning experience
that grew out of my editorial experience
of doing Feature magazine (which he self-
published) but exploded to a much broader
scale. Back then the big hall was Room 6. I
got to work with the programming volun-
teer team and steer the content of the Con.
We supervised something like 200 pro-
grams during the Con, a drop in the bucket
compared to what the current program-
mation that encourages appreciation of com-
ics, and the important role comics play in
the broader culture.” Toward that end,
comic art scholars found a home at Comic-
con starting in 1992, with the introduction
of the Comic Art Conference. Founded by
Peter Coogan, a graduate of Michigan State
University, and Randy Duncan, Commu-
nication Department chair at Henderson
State University, the CAC became an official
part of Comic-Con in 1997. Being part of the
Con facilitated the participation of profes-
sionals in the panel discussions, workshops,
and other presentations, which occur all
days of the convention, essentially a mini-
convention within the larger Con. The
CAC continues to this day, with Travis
Langley and Kathleen McClyancy coordinat-
ning alongside Duncan and Coogan and the
Comic-Con programming staff, and is also a
part of WonderCon each year.
The Comic-Con Masquerade had been
taking place offsite in the 1990s. Martin
Jaquish, who has continued as director of
the event to the present day, stated that
those were difficult years and was pleased
when, in 1999, Comic-Con was using
enough of the new Convention Center to
warrant moving the Masquerade there.
For its first three years, it was in Ballroom
6. Then, when the center was expanded, it
moved to Ballroom 20, where it could be at-
tended by a thousand, 4,000-plus (addi-
tional viewing rooms, where the Masquer-
ade is broadcast on big screens, take the
attendance up to over 5,000). It has become
an impressive well-orchestrated event, with
substantial prizes (monetary and other-
wise) given by a litany of sponsors, such as
Hollywood’s Art Director’s Guild, the Cos-
tume Designer’s Guild, and the Motion Pic-
ture Cost- of-ars, as well as various publish-
ing companies such as DC Comics, and even
the Will Eisner Studios. Winners also receive
a special custom-made medal.
“The contestants are floating on air when
they come off the stage. We make them feel
like a star for the night.”
Comic-Con in the New Millennium
With the coming of Y2K, film became an
even more important part of Comic-Con
than it had been before. Gary Sassaman,
a comic self-publicizer who was doing free-
line work for the Con, was hired to suc-
ceed Charles Brownstein as the director of
programming, when Brownstein became
executive director of the Comic Book Legal
Defense Fund. Sassaman: “I don’t think I re-
alized what I was getting myself into when
I took the programming job. I’m life-long
Program Book.

publications. " The Con prints (Comic-Con'scommunications was always the annual WonderCon Both loved. we first met and one of the things we of our life together as both the place ways been one of the main centers

watch a panel for our favorite movie the Holiday Inn at the Bay, and sneak post-con parties with all our friends at the basement of the Hotel San Diego, 16mm projectors late in the night in favorite memories with him are running together since 1986. Some of my fa 2018. We met while working on the away from brain cancer in November Comic-Con President. John passed

ments at Comic-Con are the ones I

other in the world.

Comic-Con is an amazing festi- of Matt Groening's shows. I think it remember sitting in a panel for one

DVDs, action figures, or costuming. I always have a great time and see some part of my own work a little differently from viewing someone else's active work through their own lens. I remember sitting in a panel for one of Matt Groening's shows. I think it might have been for Futurama. Some one asked him what inspired him to create The Simpson. He said, "Comic-Con." Comic-Con is an amazing festival of creation and creativity like none other in the world.

But far and away the best mo-

sions and views it as an important part of the configuration of the various updates changed, but the centerpiece of the pub-

lications was always the annual Souvenir Book. Sassaman: "All of these publications were basically promotional vehicles for our events, but the Souvenir Book also featured articles that fit into our yearly programming themes. I'm particularly proud of the mix of topics and authors each year. I think we have the only convention in the world that does a book like the Souvenir Book and gives it free to its attendees. Other conventions do Program Books—schedules and maps of the event, and so on—and we continue to do that, too, with our Events Guide and Quick Guide publications." The Con prints over 130,000 copies each year of the Souve-
nir Book and views it as an important part of its mission statement, to create awareness of and appreciation for comics and related popular ar

Programming has continued to fill vari-

ous riches. Robin Dorlan, once vice presi-
dent/administrator of events and now president of Comic-Con, particularly loves the Con's many "How To" panels. The pan-
els show some kind of skill in action, such as live art demos (drawing), Film School (which the Con has done for 15 years now), writing workshops, even Comic Book Law School with Michael Lovitz. Dorlan: "I love them because they actually contribute to the future of comic art or whatever field is involved, by giving people the knowledge to enhance and grow their talents."

At the same time the Con committee was dealing with the enormous size of the event, they had also taken on the job of coordi-
nating WonderCon, a major show held in the Bay Area in March or April each year. Conceived by retailer John Barrett (a found-
er of the Comics and Comix retail chain) and other Bay Area comic fans (including writer and publisher Mike Friedrich and retailer Joe Field) in 1987 as the "Wonderful World of Comics Convention," it was brought into the Comic-Con fold in 2002, when the re-
maining two partners (Friedrich and Field) sold the show. The event made its home in the Moscone Center in San Francisco until 2011. When that venue was being remod-
eled the following year, WonderCon moved to Anaheim, where it has stayed (except for one year in Los Angeles). I suppose that even though WonderCon Anaheim draws close to 70,000 attendees, it's called a "smaller Con co-produced this exclusive print with Mondo, featuring the 10th anniversary of the Marvel Cinematic Universe by artist Matt Taylor. It was the first poster the Con did since the 1980s.
and put it on the wall. I had to do them fast. My friend, Bill Finger, never received credit during his lifetime for creating the characters, God bless. 

50th Anniversary of Comic Fandom, ” says Evanier. It’s about family, friends, and having fun. "There’s a level of trust, and when you have that level of trust, people will do anything for you."

A popular feature of the Con was actually born at WonderCon in 2002, before perma-

nance. It was called "Quick . . . Draw!" and it was a "cartoon improv" show. The idea was to have a panel of cartoonists on stage, drawing and telling stories as quickly as they could. The audience would guess the endings. It was a hit, and it's been a mainstay of the Con every year since.

The cast of Marvel's Avengers movie at Comic-Con in 2010; two years before the movie premiered. (left to right): director Joss Whedon, Chris Hemsworth, Clark Gregg, Scarlett Johansson, Jeremy Renner, Chris Evans, Samuel L. Jackson, Robert Downey Jr., and Mark Ruffalo.

Browstein Executive Director, CBLDF

Some have criticized Comic-Con for losing its focus on comic books themselves. But, as Bob Chapman (owner, Graphitti Designs) put it: "Look around you at all the movies, TV shows, videogames, and toys out there today. Even if they do not represent the best of comic property, you can see how comics influenced their very existence."

The comics industry is a petri dish for many creative ideas, and Comic-Con is the main-

vention of the positive, creative influence comics has had on pop culture." Paul Levitz: "San Diego still has as much comics-related programming as any convention has ever had. There's a ton of panels, a ton of events, a ton of working professionals there. Yeah, there's a lot of noise from the film and TV stuff, but people enjoy it and some discover the characters that way. I fell in love with Superman partially because of the George Reeves Adventures of Superman TV show. When that didn't fall in love with the Batman. The Animated Series or off the Arrowverse on the CW! Whatever connects them to the characters, God bless." In 2011, one of the Con's themes was Diversity and Inclusion. That year, Fae Desmonds and the David Glanzers of the Con dedicated an entire panel to diversity and inclusion. It was called "The 50th Anniversary of Comic Fandom," and it was a "cartoon improv" show. The idea was to have a panel of cartoonists on stage, drawing and telling stories as quickly as they could. The audience would guess the endings. It was a hit, and it's been a mainstay of the Con every year since.

Each year brings speculation on whether Comic-Con will leave San Diego for a venue in another city that can accommodate the huge numbers of people who come to the Con. But, as Bob Chapman (owner, Graphitti Designs) put it: "Look around you at all the movies, TV shows, videogames, and toys out there today. Even if they do not represent the best of comic property, you can see how comics influenced their very existence."

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of encounters between the fans, friends, and the people who create the objects of their fascination?

Bob Wayne talks about the Con’s contribution to the hobby itself: “The growth of Comic-Con for the past 50 years is one of the key steps to the legitimacy of the comic art medium and for the hobby. The convention is a good micro-barometer of that, in that, when it started, comics were more or less obscure to most people. Whereas at this point, people who have probably never read a comic have now heard of the convention, because it’s something that touches their life in some way, with all the entertainment media coverage of the event. I don’t think anyone would have foreseen that level of public awareness when the convention started.”

On a personal level, what matters is the impact of Comic-Con, and the experiences it has fostered, on the hearts and minds of those who have attended. As founder Shel Dorf simply put it on the cover of the Mini-Con schedule, back in March of 1970: “Lifelong friendships are formed at these conventions.” He could have added, “And lifelong memories, as well!”


Comic-Con in the 2010s is a veritable city unto itself, with over 130,000 people coming and going over the 4.5 days of the event.

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