NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. February 4, 1955. I'm Sally Helm.

The Comics Czar has been busy. Judge Charles F. Murphy is in charge of enforcing the new comics code. Meant to make comic books less violent. More family friendly. To address a growing backlash against them. And Murphy’s here today to report on that work to a New York State legislative committee.

He's provided them with a series of before and after panels. In some, it's clear that the Comics Czar, or his minions, have ordered that a character be plucked from the jaws of death. Before: three men come across a flaming car. The speech bubble reads: "We found all three dead." After: same car, no flames, and the speech bubble says: "The men had been knocked out when the car side-swiped into a tree." (The comics code has been good to these particular reckless drivers.)

Another panel shows a dead woman in a tight black dress lying in a pool of blood. There’s a crowd of onlookers, one of whom appears to be randomly naked? A note below the drawing reads: "Criticism: Put dress on girl in rear and change position on girl in foreground. Take out blood." In the next panel: no blood, and everyone is wearing clothes. The victim, unfortunately, is still dead.

The committee praises Judge Murphy for his work. He has indeed cleaned up comics, at least a little. But later in the afternoon, another witness takes the stand. He's a noted psychologist named Frederic Wertham who has been at the very center of the backlash against comics. And today, in this grand meeting room, he says that the industry has not nearly gone far enough.

Mariah Adin describes this whole scene in her book, The Brooklyn Thrill-Kill Gang and the Great Comic Book Scare of the 1950s. At one dramatic moment of testimony, Wertham pulls out a whip, and a knife--weapons he says he bought through ads printed in comic books. And he points to the recent case of "The Brooklyn Thrill Killers." A group of teenagers who went on a violent, murderous spree that Wertham says was partly inspired by what they saw in comic books. He says one of the killers was obsessed with horror comics, and even imagined himself as a vampire. On the night of one of the murders, he made sure to wear the black leather pants of his quote "vampire costume." Wertham testifies: "I will go so far as to say that had it not been for the crime comic books, these particular crimes would not have been committed."

The hearing comes to a close. And the committee is left to decide: what is the future of the comic book?

Today: the war on comics. Why did one of the country's leading psychologists see them as a major threat to American children? And what can the Great Comic Book Scare teach us about moral panics?

[AD BREAK]

Before there were comic books, there was the humble comic strip. One of the earliest, released in 1895, was "The Yellow Kid," about an Irish immigrant child who wore a big yellow night shirt with different
messages written on it. Soon enough there were the Katzenjammer Kids, a set of German twins, and Foxy Grandpa, who's always getting the better of his mischievous grandsons.

And basically, as long as there have been comics of any kind, there have been people who thought they were ruining society. They were faulted for corrupting morals. For encouraging illiteracy.

**David Hajdu:** For being bad for the eyes. They were faulted for everything they were and everything they did.

**Sally Helm:** That's Professor David Hajdu. He's a professor at Columbia University's school of journalism and a cultural critic, who wrote a book called "The Ten-Cent Plague."

**David Hajdu:** The 10-cent plague is a phrase I made up, but it grows out of the idea that comics were contagion, they were a plague on American culture that was infesting young people in particular.

**Sally Helm:** Hajdu says, this partly has roots in racism and xenophobia.

**David Hajdu:** Comic strips were made by immigrants, mostly for immigrants, mostly.

**Sally Helm:** And there was also just the fact that they were new. It's a classic story: a backlash to the new, hot art form that eventually goes away when that art form becomes not so new. By about the 1930s, people have gotten used to the comics.

**Getty Archival:** Yes. Almost everybody reads the comics...

**Jeremy Dauber:** The moral panic about comic strips goes by the wayside and comic strips are you know, as red, white, and blue and American as apple pie.

**Sally Helm:** Jeremy Dauber is a professor at Columbia University and the author of a new book, “American comics.” He says, by the 30s:

**Jeremy Dauber:** You really had to follow what was going on in the comic strips. This was just part of the cultural currency.

**Getty Archival:** On Sunday morning, at least this is America...

**Sally Helm:** But just when people are getting used to the comic strip, enter a new technological innovation—the comic book. It's a cheap form of entertainment that a kid can buy for a dime at a local store, unsupervised.

**Getty Archival:** Here is a medium of entertainment that appeals to all ages, tastes and backgrounds.

**Sally Helm:** Then in 1938, another big breakthrough:
Jeremy Dauber: Action Comics number one featured this new character of theirs, Superman.

Sally Helm: "Costumed heroes" explode onto the scene. Captain Marvel, Captain America, Wonder Woman. Good guys taking on evil! Which resonates especially as American troops go off to fight in World War II.

Jeremy Dauber: You had characters like Captain America, created by two Jews, who really appeared, you know, with a sock to Hitler's jaw.

Sally Helm: But there are some parents and teachers and moral crusaders who look at this new trend, and say:

Jeremy Dauber: ‘You know, we're not so crazy about the rise of this superheroing that seems to disregard a kind of law and order.’

Sally Helm: Superman is not stopping mid-flight to check in with the government, or the police. And there's generally no due process for anyone in these stories.

Jeremy Dauber: They are establishing order through force. Right? All these superheroes ended up punching out people and all this—

Sally Helm: And to some of those moral crusaders:

Jeremy Dauber: Not many, but to a couple of them, that even had certain kinds of overtones of fascism.

Sally Helm: During the war years, the Allies are busy fighting real-life fascists. But after the war, people have time to worry about other things again. And they start to worry about...the kids.

Archival: Upon America’s youth, the excitement and emotional tension of war is today exerting an influence which psychiatrists fear may be felt for years to come.

Jeremy Dauber: You know, the entire country has been on a war footing for years. All sorts of social arrangements have been thrown up in the air. There've been massive shifts in the labor system. Tremendous strains and stresses on the family structure. And so, there are a lot of questions about, are the kids going to be alright after all of this trauma?

Sally Helm: And pretty soon...

David Hajdu: Parents started noticing that young people were behaving differently.

Sally Helm: David Hajdu again.
**David Hajdu:** What are they doing? Well, they're riding motorcycles. They’re wearing leather jackets.

**Archival:** Youngsters are venturing into new and unwholesome worlds—

**David Hajdu:** They're speaking in slang. They're acting tough.

**Archival:** Experiments with new sensations, such as the smoking of marijuana, are tempting more and more teenage youngsters along dangerous paths.

**David Hajdu:** And looking for reasons for this, so how could it be? Young people are acting so differently. They're, they're acting out, what are the causes?

**Archival:** Juvenile delinquency now is recognized as a major problem by the top law enforcement officials on the land.

**Sally Helm:** Hajdu said, the adults weren't totally wrong. Young people were acting differently.

**David Hajdu:** One reason we know now is that that's what young people do. And, and two, these are young people who grew up in the wake of World War II and saw that the world is a complicated place, and the world is a dark place and horrible things can happen and had a kind of cynicism about the world that their parents didn't have. So that was a gift to young people at the time but one that older people saw as a failing, saw a sin, saw as a crime.

**Sally Helm:** They begin looking around for causes. And they find one.

**David Hajdu:** Comics must be the cause.

**Sally Helm:** In the postwar years, comics have been covering increasingly adult subject matter. Partly because, people who loved comics as kids in the thirties are now growing up. So comic books are taking on new topics. Sex. Romance. Crime.

**David Hajdu:** They grew darker and darker and more serious, and they spoke with particular urgency to GIs who continued to read comics during the war years and who came back from World War II with a dark feeling about the world.

**Sally Helm:** But younger people are reading those darker comics, too. And the older people are getting worried.

**David Hajdu:** They started to fear that these comics could incite violent behavior and young people that they were the cause of this new phenomenon juvenile delinquency, and then all hell broke loose.

**Archival:** The almost universal addiction of American youngsters to the comics is a cause of serious alarm to some parents.
Like this woman, featured on a 1948 report about comics.

Some comics are good, but most comics are killers. They kill time, they kill imagination, and they kill the urge to read books.

One man in particular will become a key anti-comics crusader. A psychologist named Fredric Wertham.

In many aspects of his life, Wertham was a real hero. He started one of the country's first free mental health facilities open to people of color, in 1940s Harlem. His work is later cited in the Brown v. Board of Education decision to end school segregation. Both our experts told us.

He was a guy who had a lot of sympathetic features to him and, and the work that he did in comics history, however, he's considered kind of the arch villain.

He was the Lex Luther of the comic books debate.

In March 1948, Wertham is quoted at length in an article called: “Horror in the Nursery.” He describes research he's conducted at his Harlem clinic for troubled young people.

In the course of his treatment, he asked the young people how they lived, what they did, how they spent their time, what they read.

What they read were... comic books.

Now, there was nothing extraordinary about that because at the time, virtually all young people read comics. To be a young person, was to be a comics reader.

Though Wertham was in many ways a respected scientist, when it comes to comics books, he seems to have gotten carried away. He says quote: "We found that comic-book reading was a distinct influencing factor in the case of every single delinquent or disturbed child we studied."

Wertham and the anti-comic movement start getting attention. Their message speaks to the anxieties of the era.

Look at a newspaper from 1948 and see what's, what the headlines are on the front page. There's a story almost every day about either the horror of comic books or the Red Scare or about flying saucers. And they're kind of all of a piece kind of a post-war paranoia. Something has entered onto our shores that's changing our world. What is it?

Comic book makers are looking around at this growing backlash and thinking, we have to do something. So, a group of them forms a new association. They're hoping to head off government regulation by regulating themselves.

Jeremy Dauber told us, they come up with a code of standards.
Jeremy Dauber: They were not going to depict murders in a particularly gory light. Crime should not be presented in such a way to throw sympathy against law and justice. They outlawed scenes of sadistic torture—

Sally Helm: Plus, a whole range of other things. No ridicule of racial or religious groups. No women in sexy clothing. No cursing. Minimize slang. Don't glamorize divorce.

But...the code doesn't really have any teeth to it. And the new association doesn't actually have the resources to screen every single comic that's being published.

Jeremy Dauber: And so over the next five or six years, almost everybody had left this association, they didn't really care so much about it. And their business was doing gangbusters, particularly and most notably a company called EC Comics led by a guy named Bill Gaines.

Sally Helm: Bill Gaines is the anti-Wertham. The hero of the comic book story. He'd taken over EC comics from his father. The name had been an abbreviation for "Educational Comics." But Gaines changes it to "Entertaining Comics." Here's David Hajdu again.

David Hajdu: Bill Gaines published comics with lots of noir content, stories of suspense and crime and intrigue and sci fi stories

Sally Helm: EC Comics is also responsible for the invention of an entirely new genre: the horror comic.

David Hajdu: It was hard for people to see them as appropriate for kids cause they really weren't meant for kids. They were meant for young adults.

Sally Helm: But parents have it in their minds that comics are a thing for children. And as Gaines is publishing more innovative, dark stories, parents and governments are taking notice.

In April 1948, Detroit becomes the first city to legislate against comics. The city's police commissioner orders police to seize comics from newsstands to look for “objectionable material.” A few weeks later, the mayor of a town in Illinois bans the display or sale of any comic books. By 1950, there are over a hundred acts of legislation around the country to regulate comics.

Getty Archival: There is a rising current of protests from parents, welfare workers and educators.

David Hajdu: There were dozens of public burnings of comic books in school yards and other locations around the country that like echoed the burnings of books in Nazi Germany just a few years earlier

Sally Helm: Jeremy Dauber told us about a movement of concerned shoppers, who would fill their supermarket carts with frozen food and refuse to pay as long as the store was selling comic books.

Jeremy Dauber: And everyone would have to hustle and put it back before the frozen food got ruined. Whether or not the story could be absolutely verified, it's a wonderful example, of ground level communal pressures. And of course, if you were a store, and there's a local boycott of your
business because you sell comic books you know, comics are not a very, they're a low-cost item. You're just going to get rid of them. You're not going to bother sort of, dealing with the pressure.

_Sally Helm:_ In 1954, Fredric Wertham publishes his ideas in a book called _Seduction of the Innocent_. It's more or less a manifesto of the anti-comics movement.

Now, to be fair, some of Wertham's ideas were reasonable, even noble. Things like limiting sexist and racist stories or enforcing a ratings system to indicate how racy a comic was. But:

_Jeremy Dauber:_ Some of the stuff that he says really largely seems very, very far-fetched.

_Sally Helm:_ He basically says that comic books cause youth crime. He also claims that Wonder Woman is an "unwomanly," "lesbian, and horrific" model for young girls. He has a whole tirade against superheroes' relationships with their sidekicks. He thinks they’re creepy and encourage homosexuality.

The book gets rave reviews, and the anti-comics movement continues to grow.

_Jeremy Dauber:_ You have this increasing drum beat of concern, of anxiety, of panic.

_Sally Helm:_ About comics. But it's coming at the same time that there's a growing drum beat of concern about communism. These two trends are not directly linked. But the red scare is leading to increased censorship. There’s panic about communists in Hollywood. For his book, Hajdu talked to an artist who'd worked on some EC comics, who said, quote: "it was a bad time to be weird." Because people would accuse you of being either a communist, or a juvenile delinquent.

In 1953, by some measures, juvenile delinquency is down. Still, the Senate chooses that year to form a subcommittee to look into it. In its first three months, the subcommittee's chairman receives 20,000 letters from concerned citizens. About seventy percent of them are about crime shows and comic books.

And so, in early 1954, the subcommittee chairman announces: for two days this spring, they will devote the Senate investigation... to comics.

_Archival:_ Thousands of American parents are greatly concerned about the possible detrimental influence of certain types of crime and horror comic books upon their children.

_Sally Helm:_ And just like that… the anti-comics crusade takes the Senate stand.

[AD BREAK]


_Archival:_ The next comic is entitled “Mysterious Adventure.” This particular issue contains a total of six stories in which 11 people die violent deaths.
**Sally Helm:** An investigator makes his way solemnly through a series of posters.

**Archival:** The following picture shows the schoolteacher as she stabs her husband to death in order to inherit his money

**Sally Helm:** He shows the senators the mail order ads that appear at the back of these books.

**Archival:** On one page, they were killing two men, on the opposite page they were advertising dolls for little girls.

**Sally Helm:** After a lunch break, Fredric Wertham himself takes the stand.

**David Hajdu:** Coming out in a white jacket that looked like a lab coat with his severity and clipped accent.

**Wertham Archival:** This research was a sober, painstaking, laborious clinical study.

**David Hajdu:** Just exuded authority and expertise.

**Sally Helm:** Wertham's testimony goes through the greatest hits of his anti-comic arguments.

**Wertham Archival:** Other people punished over and over again—

Complete contempt for the police. —

Evil triumphs—

They want to be like Superman, not like the hardworking forsake father and mother

**Sally Helm:** All supporting his thesis:

**Werthem Archival:** It is my opinion without any reservation that comic books have an important contributing factor in many cases of juvenile delinquency.

**Sally Helm:** Wertham's a tough act to follow. But:

**Gaines Archival:** My name is William Gaines and I am the publisher of the entertaining comics group.

**Sally Helm:** Bill Gaines had heard there wouldn’t be any comic book creators testifying at this hearing. So, he volunteers. Here's Jeremy Dauber.

**Jeremy Dauber:** Gaines has a very good opening statement. ‘Are we afraid of our own children?’ He says, ‘do we forget that they’re citizens too and entitled to select what to read or to do?’
**Gaines Archival:** Or do we think our children so evil, so vicious, so simple minded. But it takes about a comic magazine story of murder. The septum to murder of robbery to step into robbery?

**Jeremy Dauber:** So, he's really taking on that point that just because you read something that doesn't make you a delinquent.

**Sally Helm:** But the strong start... doesn't last.

**Jeremy Dauber:** Gaines had really been working most of the night on his opening speech and he had been taking Dexedrine, speed, you know, amphetamines to kind of kick in at the time of his testimony, but the hearing was delayed, so the speed was wearing off and he was kind of crashing.

**Sally Helm:** During cross-examination, Gaines is presented with the cover of one of his own comic books. It's a drawing of a blond woman's severed head. The examiner asks him:

**Archival:** You think that's in good taste? Yes, sir. I do.

**Jeremy Dauber:** He says, yes, this is in good taste. For a horror comic, but this is in good taste.

**Sally Helm:** He says that bad taste, for a horror comic, would be to, say, show the bleeding stump of the head. Which he doesn’t do. It’s outside the frame of the image. But a little blood here and there...a little severed head...what do you expect? That's kind of what this genre is.

Whether or not Gaines has a point:

**Jeremy Dauber:** Sort of in the court of public opinion, he had really lost.

**Sally Helm:** A New York Times Headline the next day reads: "Comics publisher sees no harm in horror; Discounts 'Good Taste.'"

When the hearings end, the subcommittee releases a report. It tells comics publishers they have a "responsibility to the nation's youth" to ensure that their comics meet certain "standards of morality and decency." It's not a regulation—it's an ultimatum. Clean up your own house, before we do it for you.

That summer, comic publishers get organized. They develop a new comics code. It's more extensive than their first attempt, and it'll be enforced by a paid director and staff. But two days before the new code is set to be announced, Gaines holds a press conference.

**Jeremy Dauber:** Bill Gaines for his part, stopped working in the industry. Right. He got out of the comics business entirely.

**Sally Helm:** EC will no longer publish crime and horror comics.
The winter after the Senate hearing, New York politicians and lawyers and publishers gather in a conference room on that day in February, to take stock of how things are going in the world of comics. That's when Wertham, on the stand, pulls out the weapons that he says he bought from comic book ads, and he talks darkly about the Brooklyn Thrill Killers. Afterwards, a report concludes that the new comics code just isn't enough. New York passes a law cracking down on comics. And other states soon follow suit.

**David Hajdu:** The comics industry essentially collapsed after this. The most mature, sophisticated, adventurous kinds of comics all folded up and comics for a while, became juvenile, happy, cheerful, and just a shadow of what they had been.

**Sally Helm:** David Hajdu said, the whole comics controversy is really a classic story.

**David Hajdu:** And this goes back historically back to Plato. Every generation embraces art that engages with a set of ideas and themes and values that overtly challenge the values of the preceding generation. And that's what comics were doing at this time.

**Sally Helm:** You can see the same cycle play out today, with something like video games. Jeremy Dauber says one thing the comic book controversy can teach us: don't panic.

**Jeremy Dauber:** All sorts of new things, have some kind of moral anxiety that often comes about them, the kids are generally better off, they're more all right than we think that they're going to be by virtue of this material, we should be very leery about assigning any kind of monocausal explanation for social phenomenon, people are more sophisticated readers and understanders of these things than we might give them credit for, and we should really give those works more credit for kind of the richness and variety that is in them than we offer do and in trying to reduce them to what we perceive to be some problematic moral component to them.

**Sally Helm:** Over the years, radical comics do make a comeback. In the ‘60s, there’s a movement of “underground comix”—publications that refuse to follow the code and are released without its seal of approval. As those comics gain an audience, more publishers ignore or reject the code, which will be updated and reduced in the coming decades. Finally, in 2011, the last of the comic publishers would finally abandon the code altogether.

So, it's a happy ending. But where does it leave our hero, Bill Gaines?

When he quits the comic industry, Gaines decides to focus his efforts on another publication. One that isn't about horror or crime... but about humor. It's called Mad Magazine.

**Jeremy Dauber:** Mad Magazine of course became a central urtext in the development of juvenile delinquency and counter-cultural feeling, would go on to influence all the counter-cultural things.

**Sally Helm:** By 1960, almost 60 percent of American college students are reading Mad, and being influenced by its countercultural ideas. The adults are not happy. And so, the cycle...keeps on going.

**CREDITS:**
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If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

Special thanks today to our guests, David Hajdu, author of *The Ten-Cent Plague*, and Jeremy Dauber, author of *American Comics*.

This episode was produced by Julia Press. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julie Magruder, Ben Dickstein, and me, Sally Helm. Our editor and sound designer is Dan Rosato. Our researcher is Emma Fredericks. Our executive producers are McCamey Lynn, Jessie Katz and Ted Butler.

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