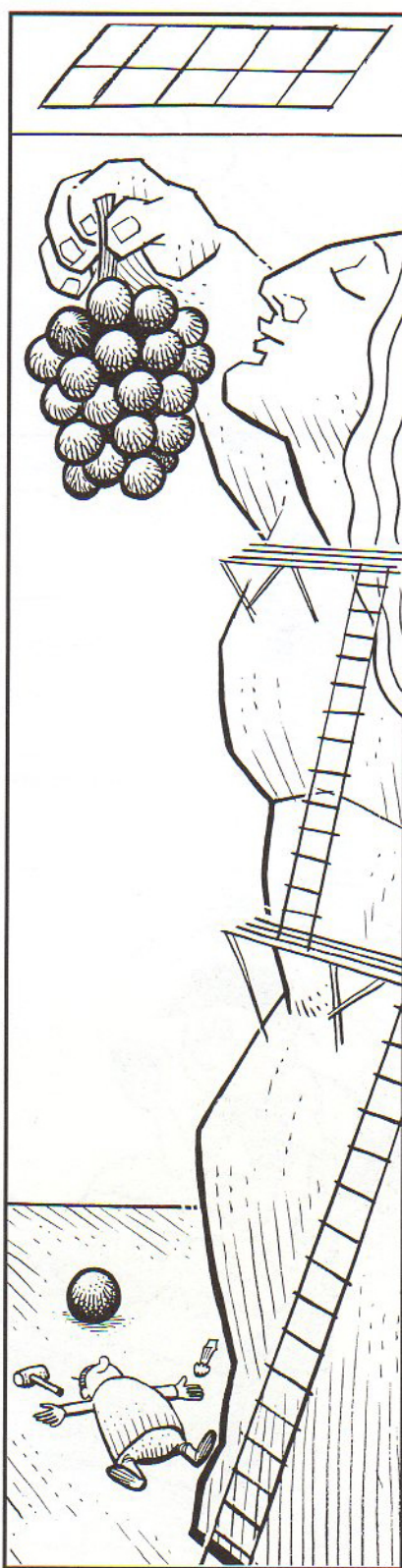




In the mid-1950s I was invited to join a group of cartoonists who created two new comic magazines, both of which failed by 1957.

Having been thrown back into the capricious world of freelance cartooning, I soon gave up eating in order to make ends meet. However, desperation (and hunger) often spurs creativity. After examining my options, I decided a syndicated comic strip offered not only economic security but would also be a great way to do the kind of cartooning that I enjoy doing. But getting a syndicate to take on a new creation was not so simple, I realized. I discovered that out of hundreds of thousands of submissions a year, perhaps one makes it. Deep down I knew it would be challenging to do this type of assignment seven days a week, fifty-two weeks each year. But for reasons even I don't understand, this was enough of a challenge that I decided to go for it!

I set about analyzing the comic strip business and discovered that newspaper space for cartoons was jealously guarded. The only way a new feature could break into the funny pages was by kicking someone else out. And when a comic strip was kicked out, the newspaper often was deluged with nasty letters from fans of the old strip. This was not encouraging. I realized that if I was to have a chance in this lottery; I'd have to create something truly unique.



The only thing I could think of was a comic feature that could fit into spaces that other comic features couldn't. After exploring every gimmick I could think of, I came up with the idea of a vertical format instead of the standard horizontal one – seven inches tall and one column wide. The natural title came to me: Tall Tales. It could be put on any page of the newspaper: the classified section, the editorial page, or anywhere else the editor wished to attract special attention.

Best of all, in this enlarged format I could create many gag situations by employing a "double take." In a seven-inch vertical space our eyes can't take in the entire area at once. As readers, we have a tendency to look at the strongest focal point first and then the secondary area. This dynamic allowed me to place the set-up for the joke in the first-glance area and pull the punch line with the second glance. In a few days' time I had a batch big enough to submit to the New York Herald Tribune Syndicate. To my shock

and surprise, they decided to distribute it. This was 1957. Looking back, that was a busy, productive year for me.

Another part of my plan was to do the feature in pantomime, that is to say, without any words. I'd always enjoyed the work of cartoonists who could communicate humor with their drawing alone. By making Tall Tales a silent strip, I reasoned it could be sold to publishers anywhere in the world without needing to be translated. Although the panels had no words in them, I did allow myself some universally understood symbols, sound effects, traffic signs, etc. The approach worked, and encouraged many publications in foreign countries to sign on as clients of Tall Tales.

– Al Jaffee

From the book Tall Tales (Abrams, 2008), a collection of Al Jaffee cartoons, with an introduction by Stephen Colbert.

