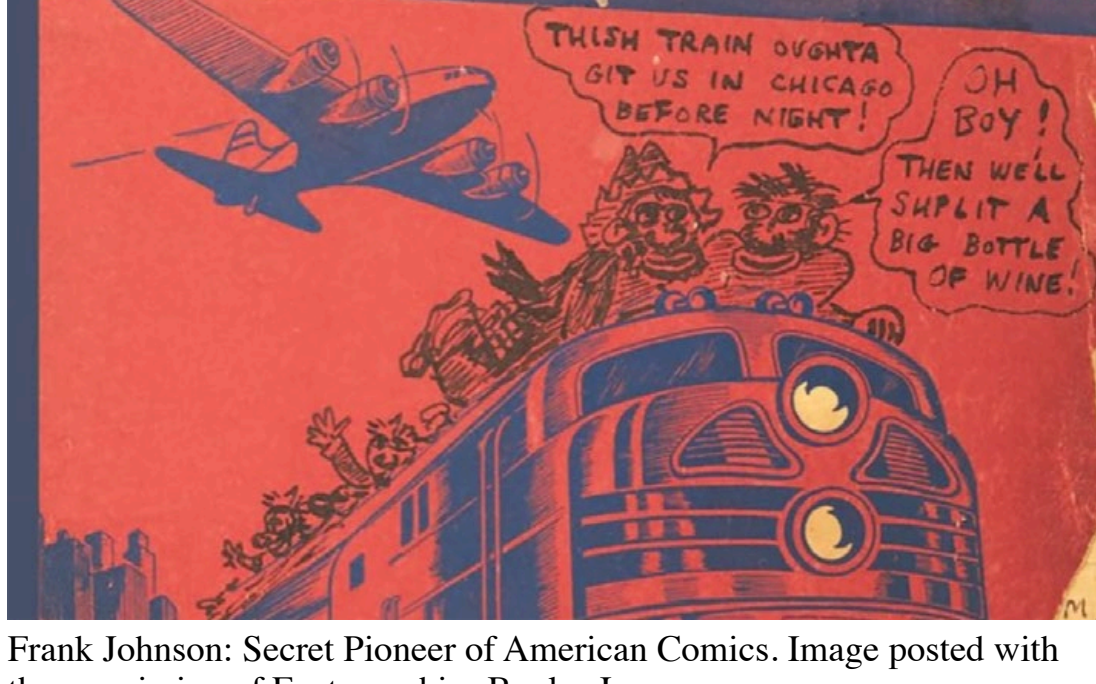


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When he died, his family discovered 50 years of cartooning output: the secret comics of Frank Johnson are published

RUBEN BOLLING / 4:34 AM TUE FEB 6, 2024



Frank Johnson: Secret Pioneer of American Comics. Image posted with the permission of Fantagraphics Books, Inc.

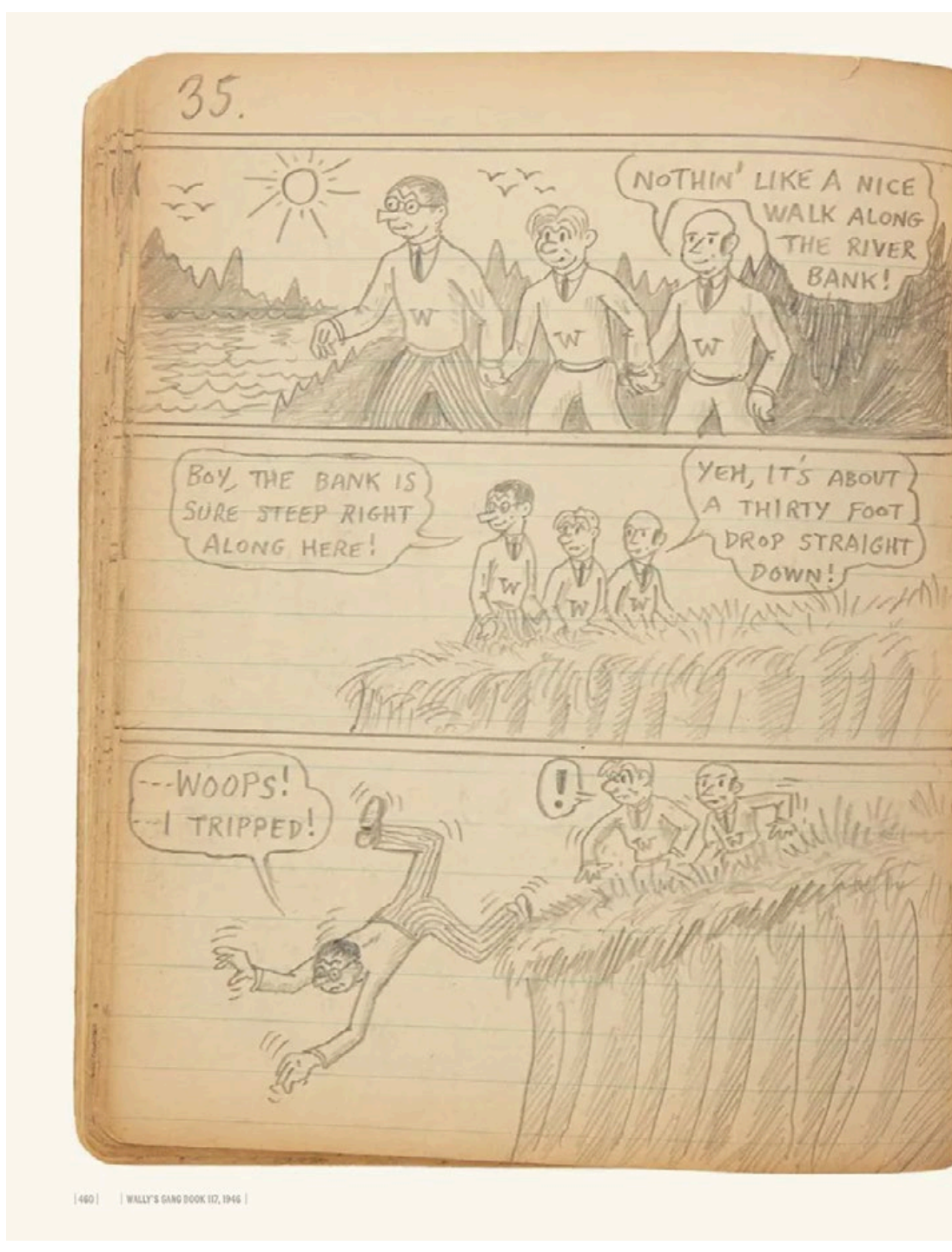
When shipping clerk and former musician Frank Johnson died in Chicago in 1979 at the age of 67, his family was shocked to discover 2,300 pages of comics in bound notebooks that apparently nobody knew about. When his widow passed away in 2003, the notebooks were put up for sale, and comics expert Dan Nadel happened upon them (according to editor Chris Byrne).

What Nadel saw astounded him: thousands of comics comprising what could be called a sprawling graphic novel, of surprising skill, created from 1928 to 1979. It wasn't until 2016 that Nadel began to find the editors and publisher who would put Johnson's comic into print.

The result is *Frank Johnson: Secret Pioneer of American Comics*, edited by Byrne and Keith Mayerson, published by Fantagraphics Books, Inc. and released this week.

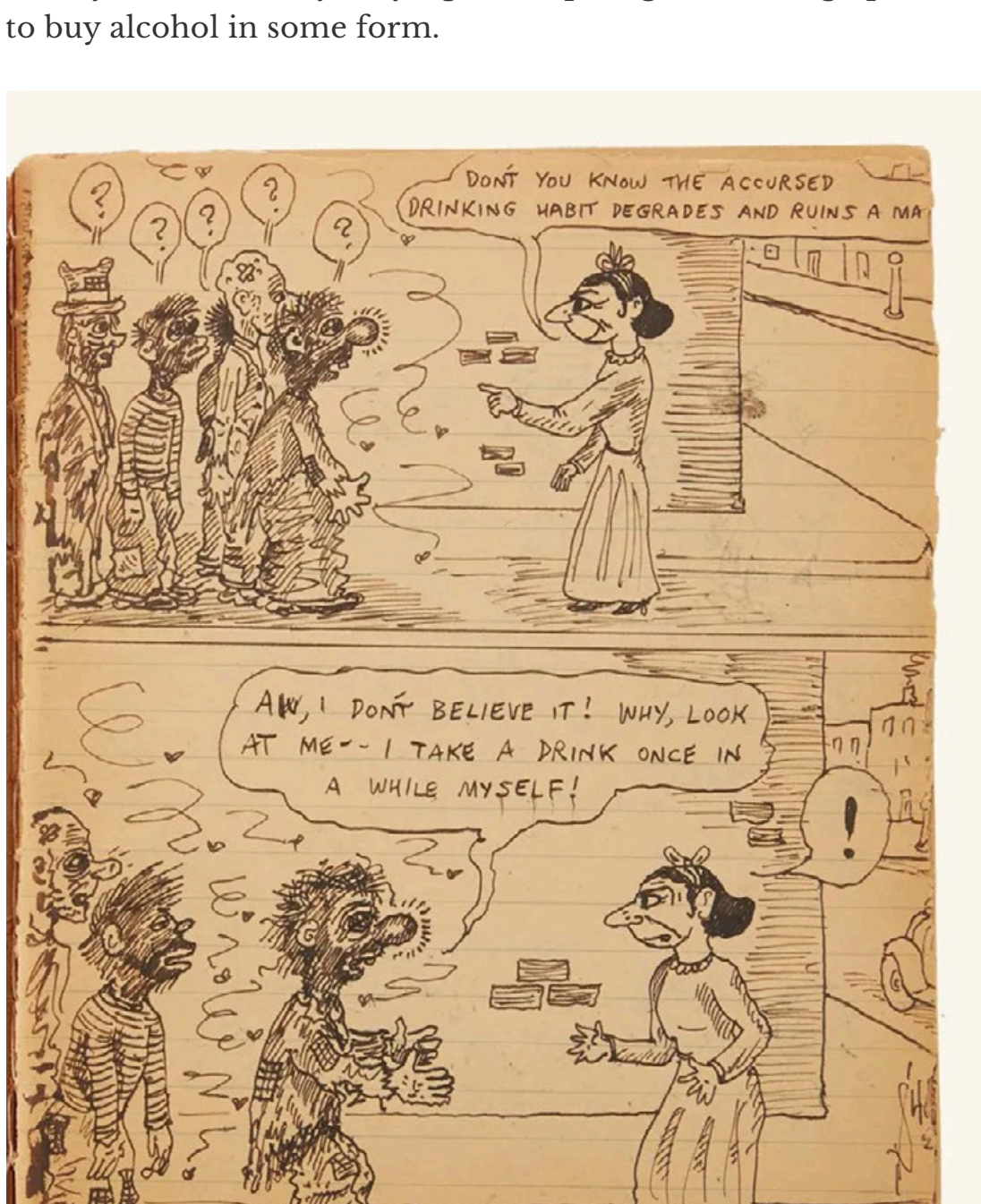
It seems almost voyeuristic to read these comics, knowing there is every possibility that Johnson did not intend anyone to ever see them. They are mostly drawn in pencil, probably because Johnson had no concern about printing reproduction. The editors wisely publish the work in its original setting: the comics are presented as you would see them if you held the notebook.

Yet the comics themselves, unlike most outsider art, are actually quite commercial and palatable for a general audience; they are mostly gag-oriented stories about a group of men, "Wally's Gang," who get into various misadventures.



Frank Johnson: Secret Pioneer of American Comics. Image posted with the permission of Fantagraphics Books, Inc.

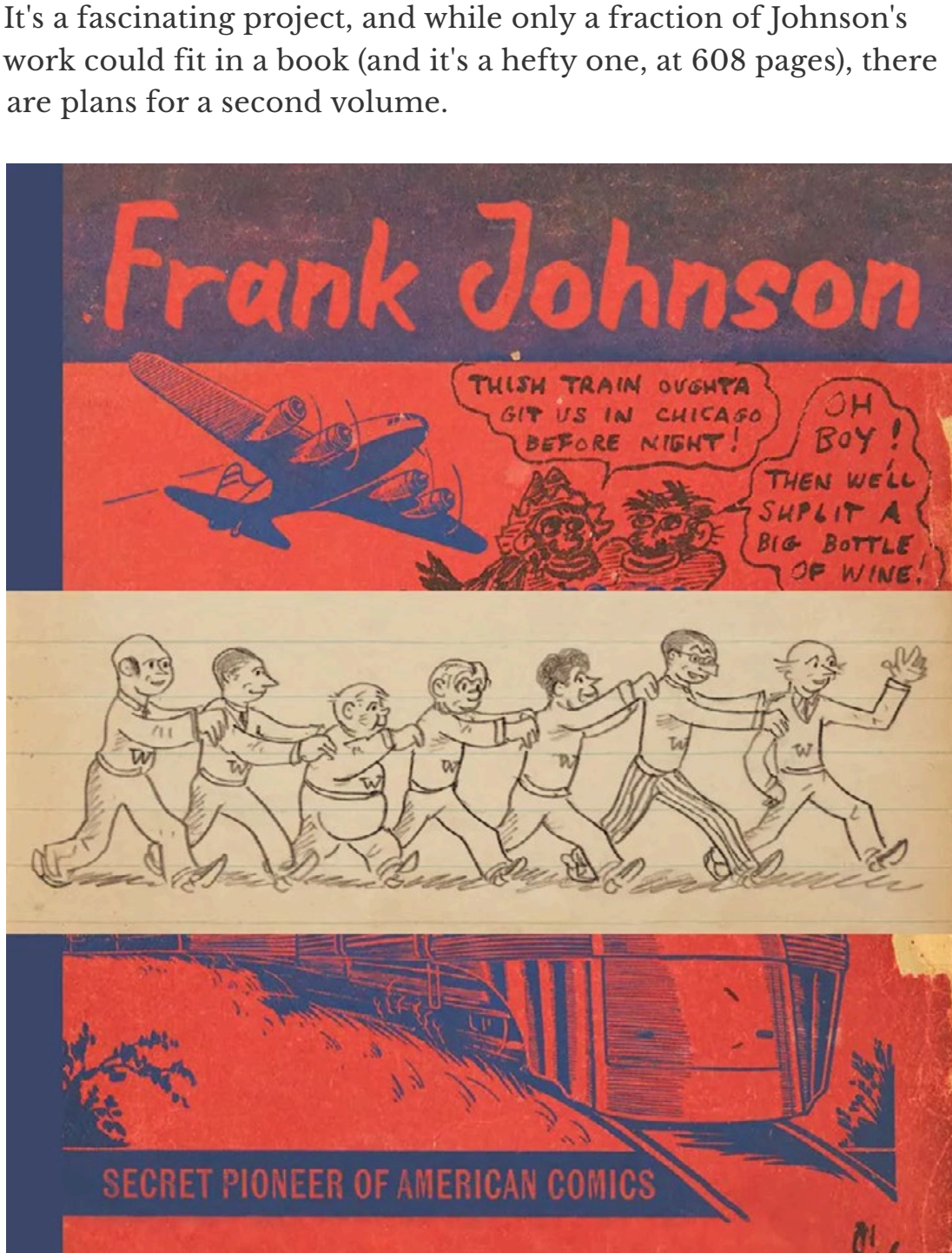
An exception is one notebook filled with comics that Johnson titled "The Bowser Boys." While "Wally's Gang" spanned Johnson's entire cartooning "career" starting in 1928, from 1946-1950 Johnson wrote and drew about a filthy band of indigent alcoholics. They were apparently drawn while Johnson suffered from alcoholism and before he recovered with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous. They're very different from "Wally's Gang": these comics are drawn in scratchy ink style and are mostly about the "boys" trying to scrape together enough pennies to buy alcohol in some form.



Frank Johnson: Secret Pioneer of American Comics. Image posted with the permission of Fantagraphics Books, Inc.

Mayerson writes in his Introduction: "Utilizing a voice and talent all his own, [Frank Johnson] was a kind of advance scout for our contemporary notions of indy comics and graphic novels. Frank Johnson is an American original, a folk cartoonist hero for the century that birthed American comics."

It's a fascinating project, and while only a fraction of Johnson's work could fit in a book (and it's a hefty one, at 608 pages), there are plans for a second volume.



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