

# Phil Seuling's 1976 NYC Comic Con

*In the early days of comics fandom, there was one convention, Phil Seuling's Comic Convention in New York City over the July 4 week. Then conventions began to proliferate. One of my major contributions to the fan press was my coverage of conventions, something that had never been done before. The 1976 New York Convention marks a watershed in a number of ways. The comics business was on the cusp of change, still run by veterans with a new crop of writers and artists and editors coming up through the ranks. Comics fandom was still in its infancy. Reading this account offers a window into change before everything became a big corporate machine and conventions evolved into the monster shows we see today. There is no other record of this convention providing details like my report. Step back to this golden age of the comics business, of conventions, and the people who made it interesting.*

From *The Buyer's Guide to Comics Fandom (TBG)*, July 1976

## New York Comic-Con 1976

By Murray Bishoff

Spending July 4, 1976 in New York City offers all kinds of opportunity for excitement. Then of course there's the Comic Convention. Phil Seuling's annual convention almost didn't happen this year because the scheduled



MAIL ORDER DEALER BUD PLANT (CENTER, BEHIND TABLE)

hotel closed up, and the deal to use the McAlpin Hotel was not signed until May 31. The endless parade of last minute jobs, including the production of a program book that arrived from the printer only the night before the convention began, took its toll, as I'll note later. However, the proceedings began on time and the fun commenced.

In his welcoming address, Phil Seuling described the events that culminated in this convention, including heretofore unseen heroics by *The Buyer's Guide's* intrepid publisher [Alan Light] in getting out con publicity. Seuling also revealed that within a



### *New DC publisher Jenette Kahn and Neal Adams*

3,500 to 4,000 people. The July fourth cons of recent years have all broken 5,000. That hurt sales, surely, but so did the Bicentennial celebration.

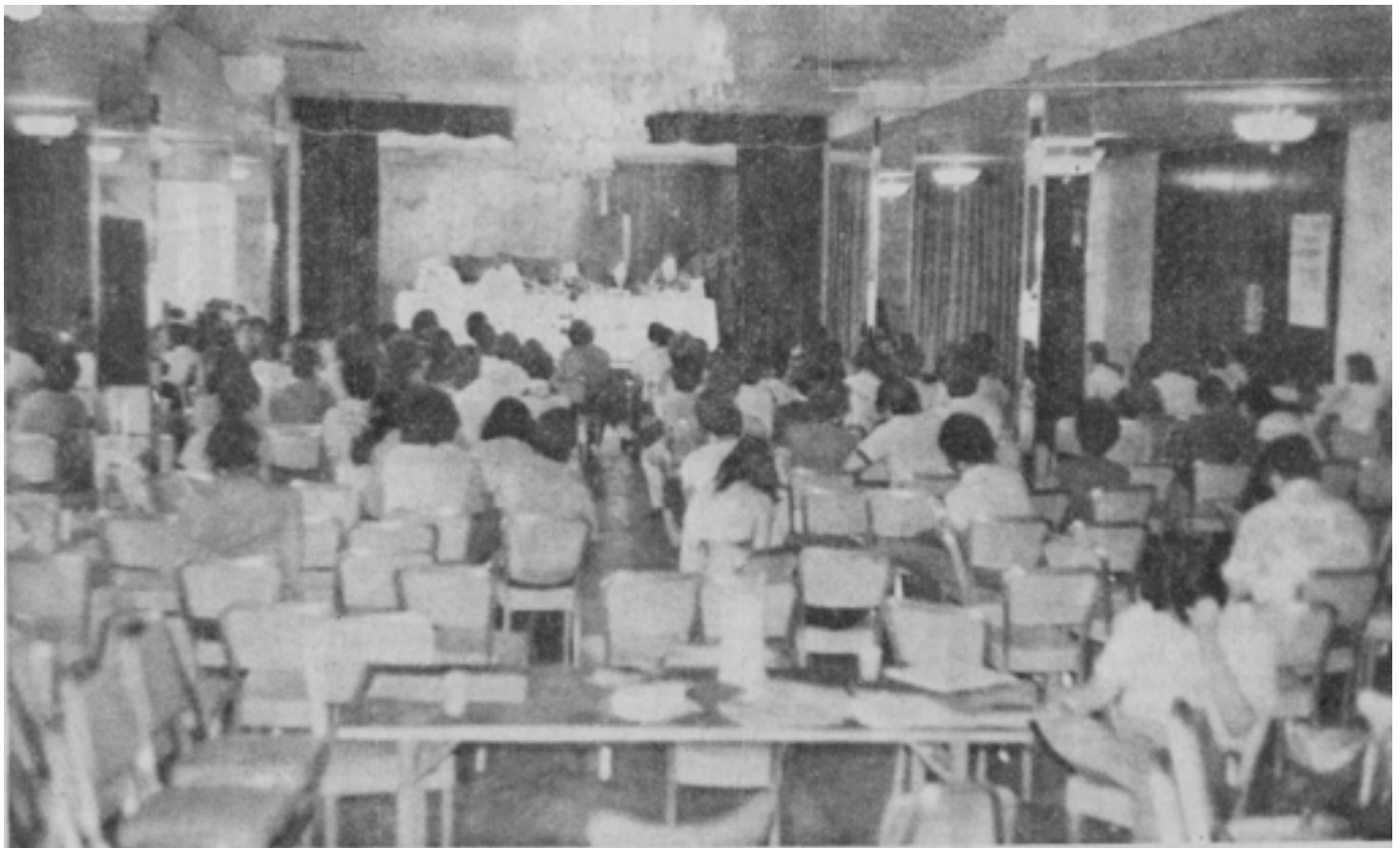
I missed the crowds of dealers as well as the fans. The McAlpin Hotel had room for 70 less dealers' tables than past conventions had had, and the Hotel lacked one really central dealers' room. This year we have five little rooms. That did not hurt the quality of the comics here. Everyone I spoke to uniformly agreed the best books were here, and prices were good. Trend books like Golden Age greats (eg. *Marvel Mystery #1*), early Marvels, and recent fads like *Conan* cost more than ever, but in general I heard very few complaints about prices at this con.

few months every hotel that has hosted the July con, including this year's host, will have closed its doors to business. If that story gets around to the remaining New York hotels, the con indeed has a bright future.

Archie Goodwin pursued this optimism in his keynote address by first summarizing some of his recent speeches in one sentence: "The state of comic books today — ptheeep!" He then expressed "cautious optimism" about current affairs, and said his policy at Marvel centers around restraint rather than repression of ideas. He reiterated his concern about the 32-page size of today's books and his hope for the 50-cent format of tomorrow.

Mr. Goodwin strikes me as an unusually level-headed man, much like Stan Lee. He doesn't make the flashy speeches of some of his younger associates, but he gives you a strange feeling of confidence in the business. The subsequent convention activities helped reinforce that feeling.

I have always liked the New York convention, in part because of its size and the mayhem crowds create, partially because of the location, and also because here the people who actually make the comics gather. The late preparations for the convention and the subsequently late advertising prevented many people from making plans to attend New York this year, so consequently the big crowds of recent years did not materialize. At the time of this writing, attendance was estimated at



THE MARVEL PANEL, ON STAGE, AND AUDIENCE.

The celebrities in the industry and in fandom really made the convention exciting. Let me run through some of the events. Dr. Thomas Inge, respected authority on popular culture, gave wonderful film salutes to George Herriman and Winsor McKay. Neal Adams received a special award for “humanitarianism” in championing the cause of [Superman creators] Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster [who had only received an official settlement with Time-Warner just before Christmas 1975]. Capt. George Henderson received the Ed Aprill Jr. Award for outstanding service to fandom. The underground comics artists involved in the suit with Walt Disney Productions over the *Air Pirates Funnies* gave a progress report on their fight, which they will take to the U.S. Supreme Court in necessary. [They ultimately lost, but laws sanctioning parodies have evolved tremendously since then].

Bob Overstreet gave a talk on how he produces the *Price Guide*. Since the *Price Guide* plays such an important role in fandom economics, I want to share some of Mr. Overstreet's thoughts with you. In general Mr. Overstreet and his staff peruse every issue of *The Buyer's Guide* and average the prices of the comics for sale with earlier listings of the same books. Mr. Overstreet also goes around to conventions and speaks with dealers to find out on that level how the advertised figures realistically reflect the buying and selling field. Essentially, then, the dealers set the prices in the *Price Guide*, and Mr. Overstreet himself affects the situation only slightly. He said he tries to strike a balance between all the data he reports.

For example, often the highest and lowest prices a book brings will not count in the final tabulation of a comic's value. *Howard the Duck* #1 reportedly brought \$17 at a convention in Berkeley recently, but that probably will not influence the price Mr. Overstreet uses. Mr. Overstreet feels strongly that inflated prices or underrated values are caught and corrected for the following year's edition. Of course new errors keep the *Price Guide* from reaching infallibility, but Mr. Overstreet felt he did well. When pointedly questioned about the inflationary role the *Price Guide* plays, Mr. Overstreet said he merely reports the figures. Besides, he felt his *Guide* has revealed the value of comics to the general public to a large extent, and by doing so his book encourages people to bring comics out of that proverbial attic instead of destroying this buried treasure.

Somehow that isn't good enough for me. Most antique dealers and small-time comic dealers worship the *Price Guide*, defying local collectors to pay prices far greater than demand would create, and unfortunately its these antique and comic dealers who refuse to take the time or the effort to advertise in *TBG* and reach the people who might pay such prices. Thus in the long run many comics come out of the woodwork because the aura of value preserves them, yet they fall in the hands of money mongers and still never reach fans. I've seen too many stubborn dealer-types to believe supply-and-demand will always triumph. Mr. Overstreet does not claim any re-

sponsibility for such behavior in resales. I think he must, although it would be hard for him to otherwise influence that type of thinking as long as his *Price Guide*, or any price guide, exists.

Mr. Overstreet also mentioned he will alter his *Guide* by expanding the condition gradings. "Good" and "mint" have really lost their meaning. The difference in prices between those two grades has widened dramatically of late, and future *Price Guides* will show a decline in prices on worn books and a continuing rise on perfect copies. Trend-wise Mr. Overstreet saw early Marvels, Disneys, and EC's leading the upward price spiral, while some things like newspaper reprint comics are declining. Finally he indicate because his *Price Guide* has steadily sold more copies every year, he believes the popularity in comic books is just beginning."

I always enjoy hearing the professional comic people speak, and this year these people spoke on a variety of subjects. Jim Steranko, who unveiled his new graphic novel *Chandler*, spoke about his book. All of the original art from *Chandler* was on display at the con, much to the fans' delight. When asked about the amazing similarity in appearance between this Manhattan detective and his creator, Mr. Steranko said this could be his last chance to be a superhero, so he took advantage of it. He concluded his talk by addressing the problems and potential of the graphic novel. It demands a new style of writing, one that can hold the reader from beginning to end in one sit-



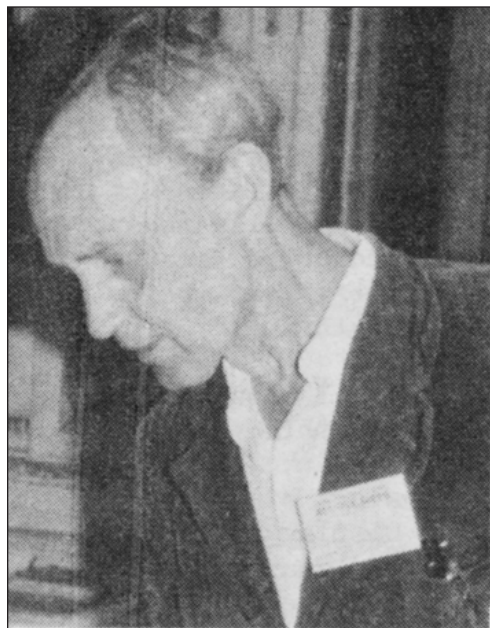
CON HOST PHIL SEULING WITH BOB OVERSTREET

ting, just like comic books. Mr. Steranko felt he had hit a balance in *Chandler* with one part text (the equivalent of about 30 pages) and two parts illustration. He did not see the graphic novel replacing comic books, but he hailed its arrival as a long awaited innovation on an old but good theme.

Joe Kubert received an award for his innovations through the years in comics and unveiled the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art. Newly founded, this licensed two-year institution in Dover, New Jersey, opens its doors this fall with courses in everything from sketching and anatomy to inking and writing.



WALLY WOOD



ROY KRENKEL

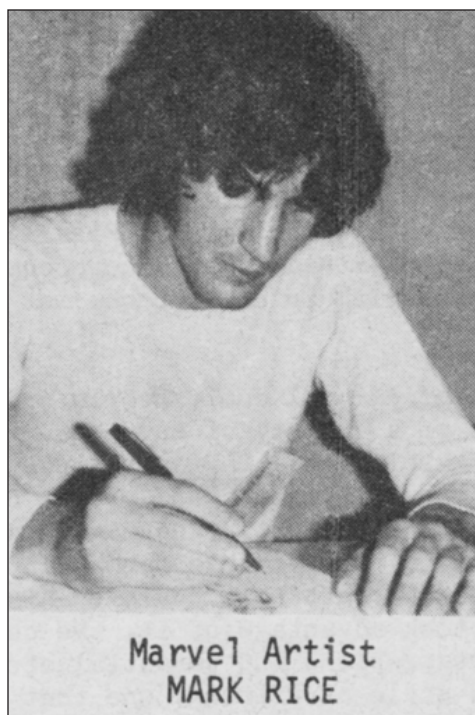
This school is primarily for artists in the business who want to improve their skill, but the school will accept all types of students until it reaches its enrollment capacity of 60. For more information, write to the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art Inc. at PO Box 894; Dover, New Jersey 07801, or call at 201-361-1327.

The Marvel and National panels turned out as curious contrasts in personality and style. Where some Marvel people displayed freedom and flair, the National group as a whole looked very austere, thoughtful, and in command. That is partly a result of the higher Marvel leadership, particularly Archie Goodwin, stepping aside and letting the staffers “do their own thing,” while the National group was headed by the leadership — publisher Jenette Kahn and editor Nelson Bridwell, so talk there became straightforward and direct.

Let's look at two members of the Marvel group first. Steve Gerber, campaign manager for the Howard the Duck for President movement, struck me as a basically quiet, good-natured fellow who thinks a lot about his work but tried to escape from it now and then. The evening I dropped in on the Howard the Duck Campaign Headquarters, I discovered Mr. Gerber had imposed an ultimatum on those present — just for one evening no one was to say anything about comics or ducks. Imagine what that did to conversation.

Don McGregor painted quite a different picture. Noisy, outspoken and domineering, Mr. McGregor made people notice him. He spoke freely about his work, declaring *Killraven* and *Black Panther* really were comics, despite what some editors said. He showed definite hostility over losing the *Black Panther*, even though in his hands that became Marvel's worst selling comic. He claimed he “had been told” he was “too close to the Black experience” and thus make the series unnecessarily hot. Regardless of that, sales deemed it necessary to either cancel the book or give it to someone else. Probably the fervor of the moment prompted Mr. McGregor's tone, but he still showed his personal zeal which comes out in his stories.

The Marvel panel brought out several interesting points. On Marvel's style of leadership, associate editor Jim Shooter, a nice fellow whom I met in Pittsburgh last year, said “There aren't any hard and fast rules. There are general rules.” The sociological term “dynamic equilibrium” best characterizes the description I heard of the Marvel system. Stan Lee takes a limited but concerted interest in the comics, and will make definite suggestions and changes on books. The panel members felt Mr. Lee knows his stuff, and deserves attention whenever he speaks. The distinctive Marvel style of freedom, in the office and in the comics, still thrives.

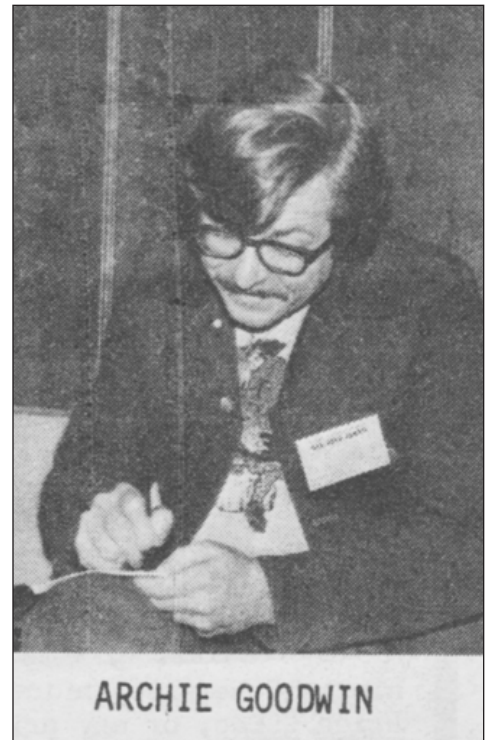


Marvel Artist  
MARK RICE

One panel member who had recent experience at both National and Marvel, compared the two systems by saying if you judged Marvel as having a linear hierarchy of leadership, then you would have to say National's system was paisley. Somehow that analogy makes little sense but it makes good copy.

Two newsworthy news items came out of the discussion. For all you fans who never got to read the infamous *Howard the Duck* #1, Marvel will reprint it along with some earlier stories in an upcoming \$1.50 *Howard*. Also, Dr. Droom, an original Lee-Kirby hero in 1960 and 1961 issues of *Amazing Adventures*, has been re-discovered, given hair and a name change, and he will appear regularly as Dr. Druid in *Weird Wonder Stories*.

The National panel also produced some interesting commentary, and a new personality. Publisher Jenette Kahn in her work with President Sol Harrison has directed the great changes at National since the departure of Carmine Infantino. I have heard, by the way, that Mr. Infantino is now



ARCHIE GOODWIN



GOLDEN AGE ARTIST JERRY IGER WITH AUTHOR MAURICE HORN

drawing for Warren and producing excellent work. Anyway, Ms. Kahn presents a totally different style of leadership. She speaks very softly with sweet sentences like "Comics truly are wonderful, and we'd like people to stay there." She has a charming and totally disarming smile. Yet from what I saw Ms. Kahn commands the respect and the admiration of an old pro, and under her leadership the morale at National has heightened dramatically.

Still, the National panel came on looking very sober, as if they wanted respect in-

stead of friendship. The panel consisted by Nelson Bridwell, Paul Levitz, Jenette Kahn, Tony Isabella, and Marty Pasko, and they spoke about the new structure at National. Joe Orlando, as managing editor, now handles all the writers, and Vince Colletta, as art director, supervises the artists. Thus the editors can concentrate more on their individual books.

In addition, writers will receive extra money for original series concepts, and will receive additional money to develop those ideas. Plus the company will pay a reprint royalty to anyone whose work they reproduce in the future. National is presently looking for a number of people who should received money for reproduced work, and if those folks ever should turn up, the money will be waiting for them. National also pays a merchandizing royalty to the artists and creators of non-comic book items, such as posters, toys etc. So actually things at National look much more free and open than they have in the past, at least financially.

As discussion and a question-and-answer session progressed, the National folks revealed several interesting news items. Some potentially disconcerting alterations in the comics line will begin the "new look," and hopefully it will all come out for the better. The *Justice League* will shift to a monthly 50-cent format in January (1977) with 35 pages of new material, and that title will retain its unique content despite the *Super Friends*, which will move into distinctly different story lines. Julius Schwartz will take the *Teen Titans* in a new direction. Following Ms. Kahn's encouraging statements toward hiring more women writers and artists, Marty Pasko noted he will also fight sexism in comics as writer of *Wonder Woman*. Tony Isabella revealed he has been placed as story editor of *Young Love* and plans to regularly toss in strange humor stories. Speaking of strange humor, we learned Bizarro will return, but when in response to one fan who requested a revival of the whole Bizarro worked, Marty Pasko said, "We haven't given up on humor books, but *Superman* won't be one of them." The proceedings had gotten quite relaxed by that point, and when asked how fans can help the distribution mess, Ms. Kahn stated if you can't find the comic you want, "Take that news dealer and beat him around the face and arms."



George Henderson of Captain George's Whizzbang

The news items this panel announced proved to be quite exciting. Warner paperbacks, another subsidiary of National's mother company, plans to publish a series of novels about Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman. Writers have not yet been set. Next January a *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* comic will appear, produced by Denny O'Neill and Joe Kubert. Ms. Kahn said he has spoken to Stan Lee about continuing the National-Marvel team-up books, hopefully on an annual basis with surprise contents.

The reprint of *Superman #1* will come out soon too, and inside it will appear a regular sized commemorative comic in salute of the Man of Steel. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster themselves will retell in comic book form how they created the first of superheroes. Because of Mr. Shuster's difficulty seeing, Neal Adams will fly out to California later this month to help with the original art breakdowns, yet Mr. Adams will see to it that the final version looks like vintage Joe Shuster. Salutes from many other artists, including the great Wayne Boring, will appear in that issue. To think that only a year ago such a tribute would not have been possible...

While we're on the subject of Superman, Ms. Kahn announced, much to the surprise of her colleagues, Marlon Brando will play Jor-el in the upcoming *Superman* movie. As I said, it was an interesting panel.

I have perhaps over-emphasized the group discussion and presentations in this report, for a convention is really so much more. Art displays by Steranko, Jeff Jones, Michael Kaluta, and amateurs on the third floor; a unique collection of films; plus dealers, fans, and Duck supporters everywhere kept things quite lively. Every few hours



THE COSTUME SHOW!

I wandered through the dealers' arena, speaking with everyone who didn't make a wisecrack about my hat, and taking pictures of everything that moved. It's grass roots contact like that, with the dealers and the fans, that makes it all worthwhile. I talked so much I think I'm going to be hoarse for days.

I can't begin to retell all the wonderful experiences and conversation I had at this convention, so let me pass on a handful of samples. I discovered a comics club formed last September in New Jersey by a group of people who call

themselves Fans of Central Jersey. Bob Pinaha stopped me in a dealers' room and told me how once, on a cloudy day, Bob Andelman got the brilliant idea he would top the Pittsburgh Comix Club with one of his own. Since then the FCJ has gathered 245 members, thrown a small but very successful convention last April, and regularly published a newsletter under the direction of Chris Pandovano. They plan to assemble a traveling display of comics for a fall tour, launch a news service on hobbies in general, and throw another convention August 1. All you folks in the New Jersey area could benefit from this club — I've found such organizations infinitely entertaining. Write to Chris Padovano (48 Embroidery St., Sayreville NJ 08872) for details about the club or that August con.

Russ Cochran always adds excitement to the New York convention by bringing a Carl Barks painting for auction. This year's painting was a honey. Entitled "July Fourth in Duckberg," this Bicentennial salute included every character Mr. Barks ever drew and key figures in fandom, including Russ Cochran, Bruce Hamilton and Don Phelps. I counted over 85 figures and faces in the masterpiece, a record for Mr. Barks, and I understand the purchaser will also have his face added to the scene. It took Mr. Barks five months to paint this picture, and it sold for a record price, \$6,400, to Don Alt and Steve Rosenthal (if I've misspelled your name, let me know). Congratulations, gentlemen. You'll remember the Bicentennial for some time.

In one dealers' room I spotted an amazing innovation in displaying comics, a series of revolving racks that put a dealer's merchandise safely and attractively at a buyer's fingertips. Michael Kauders' revolving display stands

make selling comics easy, for they put comics out where people can easily see them, they package each book so no one can hurt them or steal them, and they attract customers. I saw a lot of people come up to Mr. Kauders' display and flip through his stock just for the novel experience of seeing comics on a revolving stand.

Phil Seuling used one of these stands to display a complete set of *Captain America* comics, and the rest rested in complete safety. Without such a stand he would have needed a glass display case yards and yards long to do the job. Mr. Kauders' stands are expensive, but if you spend much of your time carrying, displaying and selling very valuable comics, you can't afford to overlook this innovation. I was very impressed. Write to Michael Kauders (Suite 238, 102 Charles St, Boston MA 02114) or look for his ads in TBG.



All conventions eventually come back to that one essential question — how did the dealers do? Let me put it this way. One fellow told me, “for the past years the convention has supported the dealers. This year it was their turn to support the convention.” Things did not go all that badly, and I think sales went better than they did in San Diego last year, but sales did not approach the expectations of a New York con. Of course it was the Bicentennial. New Yorkers went down to see the Tall Ships and ignored the superheroes. Publicity came late. Mr. Seuling also did not use the blanket publicity tactics Gary Berman loves because he found they don't work.

Mr. Seuling held a convention for the National Cartoonist Society earlier this year with ads in the local paper etc., and he only got 300 people to turn out. Thus he preferred to spend his money on a large private mailing to potentially interested fans instead of hitting an uninterested public. That makes sense, but for some reason the big response failed to come.

The dealers who had a lot of everything did well. A *Marvel Mystery* #1 sold for \$4,500, so some people had money. Most made an average amount of sales, yet unfortunately as the days wore on, whispers of “disaster” reached me regularly. A sizable percentage of dealers abandoned the convention a couple of days before it ended.

Have I said, though, the collectors complained? On no! This was a buyer's convention. And with loads of pros



wandering around, it was a fun convention. The misfortune in shifting hotels and the special holiday undid the dealers this year, I'm convinced. People also hang onto their money more and more, so the big conventions no longer rake in the cash. One New York dealer told me several times we really have to re-think the entire convention business. This year the comics were there and the prices were good, but dealers left disillusioned.

I think the future lies in smaller, more intimate get-togethers, where the flow of cash does not determine the quality of the con. I enjoyed the New York convention more this year simply because I didn't

have to fight a mob. Yes, there were problems, most of which would not have occurred on a non-1976 year. Yet this was '76. Considering all the opposition, I think Mr. Seuling did wonderfully. I had a great time, and I tip my hat to him and his staff. Now all I need is a week to recover from the festivities. Yes, Virginia, it was quite a year.