

Creator of B.C. honors 'Mama,' 98, with 'toon

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

ROCHESTER — Most people who enjoy the cartoon strip *B.C.* have to wait for their daily newspapers to arrive.

But not Katie Mantelli.

The longtime parishioner of Holy Cross Church, 4492 Lake Ave., has a personalized cartoon sent to her by Johnny Hart, the comic strip's creator.

The cartoon came in the form of a birthday card for Mantelli's 98th birthday, which she celebrated Jan. 9. The card jokingly suggests that the Charlotte resident might join on stage 99-year old George Burns, who is scheduled to perform at London's Palladium Theatre to mark his 100th birthday next year.

The card also includes the message, "Happy Birthday ... I Love You, Mama (Bobby Too.)"

The card from Hart and his wife Bobby is only the latest example in the more than 40-year friendship between the Mantellis and Harts.

Johnny Hart, who grew up in the Binghamton-area, was stationed at Georgia's Robbins Air Force base along with Mantelli's son, Chuck, in 1950-51. The

two men worked together on the base's newspaper, with Hart providing cartoons and Chuck Mantelli serving as photographer.

Chuck Mantelli recalled that, even then, Hart's dream was to be a cartoonist.

"He was always interested in drawing," Chuck Mantelli said. "He was always drawing funny things on exam papers — any place where he could find a place to draw."

The two New Yorkers visited each other's homes during furloughs. It was during a visit to Charlotte that Hart met Katie Mantelli, and soon began calling her "Mama."

"We all refer to her as 'Mama,'" Chuck explained. "Out of respect he referred to her as 'Mama.'"

"I treat him like a son when he was on furlough with Chuckie," Katie Mantelli recalled.

Besides being treated like family during his stays, Hart discovered Katie Mantelli's delicious cooking. "He likes cookies," she noted with a smile.

He also enjoyed the homemade pasta Katie Mantelli still enjoys making. She sent Hart and his wife some pasta just last year.

Hart is not the only one who has been enjoying Katie Mantelli's cooking. She remains active at Holy Cross Church, where she and her daughter, Rosemary, recently baked cookies and collected donations at the parish's St. Joseph's



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Katie Mantelli, a parishioner at Rochester's Holy Cross Church on Lake Avenue, has enjoyed a special relationship with cartoonist Johnny Hart, creator of the comic strip *B.C.*

Bazaar.

In addition, "We clean the church every two months," she said.

The Charlotte parish is the only church Katie Mantelli has known in Rochester. Born in Abruzzi, Italy, in 1897, she moved to the United States at age 14, and to Rochester in March, 1925.

"I sign up at Holy Cross the next day, and I'm still there," she observed.

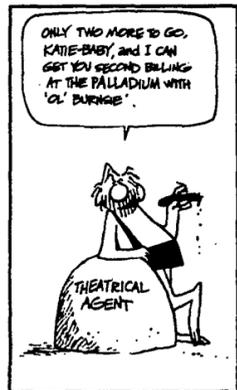
Even after Hart became a success, he continued to live in the Binghamton area — he currently resides in nearby Ninevah, N.Y. — and remained in touch with the Mantellis. He drew some cartoons for Katie Mantelli's grandchildren, and when her late husband, Frank, was sick in the 1970s, he sent a get-well card featuring all of his *B.C.* characters.

The latest card arrived after Chuck

Mantelli made some prints of pictures for Hart from their Air Force days and sent them to the cartoonist for his birthday Feb. 18. Along with the pictures, he mentioned that his mother was celebrating her 98th birthday this year.

The cartoon arrived soon afterward. "I was surprised," Katie Mantelli said. And how does she feel about Hart?

"He's a beautiful man," Mantelli said.



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