

April 6, 2000

A TRUE SUPER HERO

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Members of the Society have listened to, and hopefully heard, many biographies on famous individuals. We have been told about the exploits and achievements of famous politicians, healers, religious leaders, sports figures, artists, and soldiers. But I don't believe we have ever heard a biography on a true super hero.

The year was 1938, the ninth year of the Great Depression. The country was looking for something or someone to bring up our spirits. Someone they could only dream to be.

Hitler had just invaded Austria and Nevil Chamberland was preaching, "Peace in our Time." These were dark times in our country, with many tensions both foreign and domestic.

For diversion we were watching Johnny Weismuller running around in loincloth as Tarzan.

Movie serials featuring class B heroes were our weekly fare at the theatres, while Gene Autry entertained us with his crooning.

The pulps were around featuring the likes of musclemen and masked avengers. We read about, "The Shadow," "Doc Savage," "The Spider," and many other epic characters.

There were newspaper strips today known as comics, which were originally humor only, but the thirties brought forth the adventure strip. We were entertained by "Dick Tracy, Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, Terry and the Pirates, and the Phantom," just to name a few.

Comic strips spawned two new forms of media. One, the Big Little Books, translated stories from the strips into text, with individual panels, minus dialogue, on facing pages. The other creation was the comic book or comic magazine. This was to be a creation welcomed by many, young and old.

In 1937, a publication was created that dared to publish original material not seen before in comic strips. They emphasized adventure stories and not humor. This publication was named "Detective Comics or DC as it is known today.

We discuss DC comics only because two young creators persuaded DC in 1938; Jerry Siegel (a writer) and Joe Shuster (an artist) to publish an often rejected super hero by the name of "Superman."

D.C. editor Sheldon Mayer, took a chance on Superman, and published it as the lead feature in DC's inaugural issue of "Action Comics" in June, 1938.

We all remember the well-known introduction: "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings at a single bound! Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's SUPERMAN!"

Yes, it's Superman, strange visitor from another planet, who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men; Superman, who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel with his bare hands; and who disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American Way!"

Superman was an instant hit with kids of all ages. The people needed and were ready for a true super-hero, a man of steel.

And so we will review the biography of a fictitious character that will be sixty-two years old this June and is still achieving feats.

To truly understand the man of steel we must go back to his creators. Joe Shuster, the artist, was born in Toronto, Canada on July 10, 1914. At the age of nine, he and his

family moved to Cleveland, Ohio where he met Jerry Siegal, the writer.

In 1932/33 they created their own fan magazine based on the new fantasy fiction of that time. The magazine, title "Science Fiction" only lasted about six issues. It was around this time they created Superman. This gave birth to the "golden age of comics" in the late 1930's.

Having first introduced the super character as a villain, they eventually molded him into a super-hero which, did not market well in 1936.

Unfortunately for the two creators at the time publishers retained all the rights to the character. Hence, Shuster and Siegal has no claim to any copyright to Superman. They did however author the character with stories and artwork throughout the early 1940's.

In 1946 Shuster and Siegal sued DC comics for a share of the profits. The case was eventually settled in New York State Supreme Court in 1948. They received a settlement of \$120,000.

This amount was less than what they would have received had they continued writing for the magazine for those two years.

After the settlement, Siegal and Shuster were dropped from any association with Superman until the 1980's when DC reinstated their involvement. Siegal and Shuster had been out of comics since their court case in 1948.

They again sued DC comics in 1978. They were awarded \$35,000 each per year for the rest of their lives.

Joe Shuster died in 1992, just short of his 78th Birthday. Jerry Siegal died on January 28, 1996, at the age of 81.

These two men created a character that was the first to embody many characteristics

heretofore seen in mythological heroes. The combination of Superman's many powers was truly unique.

First, he was super-powerful. One of the oldest stories known is the "Gilgamesh Epic," of ancient Babylon. Gilgamesh, part mortal, part god, was the first recorded superhero. Ancient Greece knew countless super-beings, including Herakles, Hercules to the Romans. Indeed, the crew of Jason's ship, the Argo, was made up largely of heroes who had most of Superman's powers. Besides Herakles, there were Zetes and Kalais, who flew Euphemos, the super-speedster; Kaineus, who was invulnerable; and even Lynkeus, who we are told could see things underground--yes, X-ray vision in ancient Greece.

Then there was Superman's secret identity. One could go far back in find tales of kings traveling in disguise (even gods had this habit), as well as outlaws such as Robin Hood. But it was with "The Scarlet Pimpernel" that the modern concept of the hero with a secret identity originated.

Most early double identities were maintained by wealthy young aristocrats, like Sir Percy Blakeney, The Pimpernel, and Don Diego Vega, and Zorro. Superman assumed the active role of newspaper reporter Clark Kent.

Superman had a costume; skin tight, with cape and shorts over his leotards. Whence this outfit? From Flash Gordon? From the Phantom? There were resemblances.

Now that we have established Superman's origins how did the authors explain his appearance on the Earth. We all remember the tale of the doomed planet Krypton and the unborn Kal-El (Superman) placed aboard a rocket headed for Earth. His parents Jar-El

and Laura watched their son depart the soon to be destroyed planet. Some later versions of the story depict a young child Kal-El being placed in a rocket.

As time went on, Superman began changing his powers. He was conceived as a man who could hurdle skyscrapers and leap an eighth of a mile. Not long afterward, he could literally fly. His strength increased and so did his speed. Once only able to out-race a train, he finally, in the late forties, began travelling through time by exceeding the speed of light. His invulnerability grew. Nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin in 1939--by World War II he was shrugging off bursting shells. At the end of the war he was surviving atomic blasts.

The early Superman had no super-senses. He had to crash through a roof to catch a villain he suspected was in a building below. He soon developed x-ray vision, which no doubt saved a lot of roofs.

He became a multi-media hero between 1941 and 1943 when seventeen animated cartoons were produced about the "Man of Tomorrow."

The changes to Superman continued when, in 1942, he made his first appearance between hard covers. George Lawther wrote a book entitled, what else, "Superman."

Lawther explained how our hero was able to have super powers on Earth. As a native Kryptonian, where the air was less dense and the gravity much greater, Superman was able to fly and was invulnerable to the hazards on Earth.

Lawther also renamed his foster parents; Mrs. Kent had originally been Mary and John Kent was Superman's foster father. But in the novel they became Eben and Sarah Kent, and now it was explained that Clark was Sarah's maiden name.

Clark Kent's original employer was the Daily Star, which soon became the Daily

Planet. The editor once known as George Taylor mysteriously became Perry White.

His first archenemy was a character named Luther who for years later acquired the first name of Lex.

On February 12, 1940, the radio series made its debut. Jimmy the office boy became a featured character on the radio version of Superman. The radio writers wanted a boy to which their audience could identify. Johnny Olsen played a much larger part on the radio than either the newspaper strip or the comic books in the early forties.

With the end of World War II, two things were changing for Superman. In the January-February issue of "More Fun Comics," a new feature had been born; Superboy. His foster parents were renamed again and became Jonathan and Martha Kent. Many heroes began to falter in the print media after the war but Superman showed his staying power.

In the tenth anniversary issue in 1948 the origin of Superman was again retold. In this issue it depicted how a young Superman discovered he had super powers. No mention was ever made of Superboy. It was a flat contradiction to the Adventure Comics version of the character Superboy. DC published both comics.

New foes had to be created such as the Ultra-Humanoid, The Prankster, The Toyman, The Puzzler, and Mr. Mxyzplk; the imp from the fifth dimension.

The radio show had to have a few innovations. Superman and Batman teamed up to fight evil-doers. But the thing that changed Superman forever was the discovery of Kryptonite.

Kryptonite was the only substance known that could endanger Superman. As a native

Kryptonian, Superman could actually be killed by Kryptonite.

Before Kryptonite could reach the comics Superman made an appearance in two Columbia serials; Superman (1948) and Atom Man vs. Superman (1950). He later made a feature film in 1952; Superman and the Mole Men. True artistic classics.

Kryptonite hit the comics as a red colored substance, which later became permanently green.

Superman also discovered in the early 1950's that he was actually an alien from another planet. What a shock that must have been.

Only Superman and Batman remained on top of the super hero pile and only Superman was able to expand his presence. Superboy got his own comic book in 1949 and Jimmy Olsen followed in 1954.

Radio was giving way to television and in the fall of 1952 a new series; "The Adventures of Superman" made its debut. George Reeves starred as the man of steel. Once again, his Superboy career was ignored, and the names of Eben and Sarah Kent were resurrected from the novel. Some scripts gave Superman odd powers which he had nowhere else, including the ability to walk through walls and to split into two Supermen.

As a youngster in those days, I can still remember Perry White's famous expletive, "Great Caesar's Ghost." Jimmy Olsen the timid but ambitious cub reporter and Lois Lane whom really admired Superman but was always in competition with Clark Kent for the big story. Who could forget Inspector Henderson and the Metropolis Police Force that could never solve a case without Superman's help. No one ever suspected Clark Kent's true identity.

Superman developed some new powers for television; super-hearing, telescopic and

microscopic vision, and super-breath.

The television series ran until November 1957-- a total of 105 episodes. The radio series ended in 1951 when the television series began.

Superman was back to only newspaper strips and comic books in 1957.

The story of Superman would not be complete without mentioning Clayton Collier. He was the voice of Superman and Clark Kent on the radio version from 1940 to 1951. He also did the first six cartoons in the early 1940's.

In the forties the man of steel had a secret hideaway in the mountains of Metropolis. In the fifties Luthor discovered his "Secret Workshop" and Superman had to flee to the arctic to his "Fortress of Solitude."

Our hero discovered that he had a young cousin in 1959. Supergirl had survived Krypton's death because her entire city of Argo City had been blown into space on a huge fragment. Supergirl adopts the secret identity of Linda Lee.

Superboy also adopted a super dog, Krypto, who aided in crime fighting.

Superman made Broadway in a musical entitled, "It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman." This musical was written by David Newman and Robert Benton, music by Charles Strause and lyrics by Lee Adams. Lois Lane and Perry White sang along with Superman in the Broadway show.

In the sixties Superman returned to TV in a new form; a new series of animated cartoons for the home screen. Bud Collyer, also known as Clayton Collyer, was back doing the voice thus; he had been Superman for radio, movies, and TV.

Into 1978, Christopher Reeve redefined Superman for a new generation of

moviegoers. Reeve starred in three more big screen features as the man of steel with Gene Hackman as Lex Luthor, Margot Kidder as Lois Lane, and Richard Pryor as the villain.

1993 brought forth the TV series Lois and Clark starring Dean Cain and Teri Hatcher in the feature roles.

An idea created by two young men from Cleveland, Ohio has become one of the most successful characters of all time. The newspaper strip ran for 28 years (1939-1967), a radio series ran for eleven years (1940-1951), and a television series was produced for seven years (1951-1957). Superman has been featured in numerous cartoon series and eight feature motion pictures. The man of steel can still be seen as a comic book today. Many young boys and girls have been seen flying through their homes with capes blowing in the wind. Superman will eternally be fighting a never ending battle for truth, justice, and the American Way!

The End