

Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's an Ohio native!

By DAN WOODARD

For a fellow celebrating his 70th birthday this year, Superman is looking pretty good. Most folks have at least heard of Superman in passing. However, even many of his fans aren't aware that he was created right here in Ohio, by two Jewish teens attending school in Cleveland.

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were both born in 1914, and first met around 1931 when they were students at Cleveland's Glenville High School. Shuster had just arrived from Toronto. Siegel, hearing that Shuster was an artist, approached him. It turned out that they both shared a strong interest in science fiction and fantasy pulps such as *Tarzan* and *Buck Rogers*. Early on, they both worked on the school newspaper. In 1931, Shuster started lifting weights, and Siegel started imagining a man with almost boundless strength.

In 1932, they started their own fan magazine entitled *Science Fiction*. The first version of Superman appeared in the January 1933 edition, wherein a scientist takes a homeless man and exposes

him to a chemical from a meteor rock. Later the homeless man develops amazing mental powers and sets out to rule the world until the super powers eventually wear off.

Jerry and Joe noticed later the same year that original stories were beginning to appear as comic books at the newsstands. They reacted by making some major adjustments to their Superman story and tried to sell it in the new graphic format, but still with no success. The second version of Superman was strong, but he had no true super powers and wore no specific costume.

In late 1934 to early 1935, they added to the mix the bright costume, the arrival from another planet, and the secret identity of Clark Kent, creating their third version of Superman — a character much like the one we know today. From 1936 to 1937, they attempted to syndicate their creation with Dell Publishing and later United Features, with no takers. Finally they made a sale to National Publications (later known as DC), and 13 pages of Superman first appeared in *Action Comics* #1, (June 1938). Before they knew it, Superman comics were selling a million issues per month.

National was quick to capitalize on Superman's popularity by following up with licensed toys, a radio show and animated theatrical serials.

The Adventures of Superman began airing in February of 1940, introducing the character to adult audiences in a live action radio drama. The show introduced Kent's boss, Perry White, copy boy Jimmy Olsen, Kryptonite, and the introduction "Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Superman!" The radio drama ran for 11 years.

In 1951, National began production of a live action TV show named after the radio drama. It

starred George Reeves in the title role but wasn't broadcast until 1953. This was also the year that total U.S. comic book sales peaked, with an estimated 70 million issues sold monthly. The next year, sales would plummet as many people blamed comics for a variety of society's teen troubles. The comics industry fought back by creating the Comics Code Authority — a code of conduct that all stories with the stamp would follow.

As time went on, Superman's writers became bored with doing the same old stories, and some changes were made. In 1971, all Kryptonite was rendered inert, Superman became a TV reporter rather than a newspaper journalist, and Superman was made less powerful so that he could truly be challenged. These changes ended up being temporary.

In the mid 1970's, as work on a proposed Superman movie progressed, there was mounting interest in the plight of Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel. By this time, both were in their 60s, in worsening health, and poor. Many writers and others announced that they would boycott the movie unless the studio agreed to share some of the profits with the creators. Warner buckled to the bad press and awarded pensions to the creators. Their names were restored to the TV shows, movies and comics. The movie itself was released in 1978. Five Superman movies and one Supergirl movie have been made to date.

After the first four movies, Superman moved back to TV for a while. A *Superboy* TV series aired beginning in 1988, produced by the same folks who made the first three movies. The year 1993 saw the launch of *Lois and Clark*, a TV show which aimed to present the Man of Steel from a woman's point of view. *Smallville* began airing in

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2001 and features the adventures of the character before he donned the tights. It has racked up an amazing seven seasons and was just renewed for an eighth.

Initially, it appeared as though there wouldn't be any local Ohio events commemorating Superman's 70th anniversary. However, a Cleveland reporter changed this when he wrote a couple of articles last fall challenging the city to get involved. A committee of volunteers began meeting in early February of 2008. The committee is planning what is now called the "Summer of Superman," hoping to schedule at least one event per month from May to September, primarily in the Cleveland area.

Possibilities include an art exhibition and contest, featuring locally created paintings and other artwork all in Superman's honor. In August, Siegel's original house in Glenville will get a plaque on the exterior. Fundraising will be starting for an eventual Superman statue in the area. You might also want to visit the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage in Beachwood. It has a permanent display on Siegel, Shuster and Superman. From September to January, they also will host a superhero exhibit.

For more information on upcoming events and celebrations as they are added, check www.positivelycleveland.com/superman for updates. To help with the "Summer of Superman" planning committee, contact cvb@positivelycleveland.com. □

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