

Hello again, and welcome. I'm June Simms in Washington.

Today on As It Is, we celebrate the life and times of one of world's most beloved superheroes. We'll hear the story of how Superman came to be and why the "Man of Steel" has lasted so long. We will also take a trip to a town that played a role in the new Superman movie.

"Man of Steel" Still Going Strong

Seventy-five years ago, on June first, 1938, the American superhero "Superman" first appeared in a comic book.

The book told the story of Superman's birth on his home planet, Krypton. His father, a scientist, sent the boy to Earth in a rocket to save his life when Krypton exploded. On Earth, Superman was able to fly. He had super-strength and X-ray eyesight. He was untouchable.

"Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive!

Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound! 'Look, up in the sky!
"Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive!
Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound! 'Look, up in the sky!
It's a bird! It's a plane! - it's Superman!' Yes, it's Superman..."

Over the years, Superman has become as much a part of Americana as many real-life folk heroes. A multi-billion-dollar industry has been built on sales and promotion of the character. With the release of the latest film, the "Man of Steel" is still going strong.

"You just have to decide what kind of man you want to grow up to be, Clark. Whoever that man is, he's going to change the world."

No one could have imagined just how much he would change the world. Certainly not Superman's creators. Writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster were just a couple of kids with an interest in reading. So says Marc Tyler Nobleman, a long-time Superman fan and author of the book "Boys of Steel: The Creators of Superman." His book tells the story of how Superman came to life.

“Well it was two young guys. They were in high school at the time in Cleveland Ohio. The writer was Jerry Siegel. The artist was Joe Shuster. And they were best friends. And they were -- I hate to use a label -- but they were geeks before the word existed and they would have been the first to say that. They were very, very interested in science fiction and adventure stories. They were not athletic. They were not extroverted. But it was when they got the chance to read and tell stories that they came alive and they really felt that they were in their element. And it's hard for us to understand how radical and how original Superman was when he debuted. But it really was something new and he is considered the world's first superhero.”

Superman was born Kal-El on the planet Krypton, which was destroyed right after his parents launched him to earth.

“He'll be an outcast. They'll kill him.”

“No. He'll be a God to them.”

Some people have found religious connections in the story. For example, like Jesus, Superman was 33 years old when he set out to save the world.

Again, Marc Tyler Nobleman.

“Certainly with this most recent movie, with 'Man of Steel,' there is some very explicit Christ imagery. But Jerry and Joe, the creators, were both Jewish and there is also some Jewish allegory, in particular Moses. Both Superman and Moses were put in a vessel as a baby and sent away from their parents. Both were found by another family that didn't know where this baby came from. And in both cases the baby grew up to become a savior.”

By the 1950s, Superman had become a household name with George Reeves further defining the character in a TV series. The series helped shaped the baby boomer generation, those born after World War Two.

“We were the first ones to have TV as furniture full time in the living room. Then there would be a quick shot of him like -- boom! -- punching a villain in the face, he's knocked out. Just one quick tap and then he goes to the next guy. It was pretty exciting! You had to be there.”

That is the voice of Howard Marshall, manager of AfterTime Comics, a well-known comic book store in the Washington area.

He also notes connections between the story of Superman and the Bible, but he does not think those similarities were intentional. Instead, he believes the comic book hero who was born in the 1930s in the middle of the Great Depression, was meant to represent the superhero in all of us.

Movie Puts Plano on the Map of the Superman Universe

The release of the latest movie in the Superman saga is helping one small town in Illinois cash in on its connection to one of the most beloved comic book heroes of all time. Jim Tedder reports.

Plano, Illinois, has a population of just under 11,000 people. American flags fly along its downtown streets.

Plano's mayor is Bob Hausler. He recalls when a Hollywood production company came to town in 2011.

“There was a lot of secrecy about the storyline, and even who the main character was.”

But in a town as small as this, it’s hard to keep a secret. Once the trucks, lights and movie cameras moved onto Main Street, news quickly spread. This was not just any Hollywood movie, but the big-budget “Superman: Man of Steel.”

For several weeks in the summer of 2011, film director Zach Snyder and hundreds of cast and crew members turned Plano, Illinois, into Smallville, Kansas. Smallville is the imaginary hometown of Superman’s adopted parents, Jonathan and Martha Kent. The location plays an important part in several key scenes in the new film.

Resident Jim Martens is the chairman of the Smallville Superfest, a three-day-long, citywide party in honor of the fictional character.

Jim Martens says even before its release, the movie drew fans from far and wide.

“Everybody had to get a piece of the action and see what was going on.”

Mayor Bob Hausler says the increase in tourists has brought new life to Plano’s Main Street.

Businesses welcomed the connection to the “Man of Steel.” Some of them hung artwork created for the movie sets on their storefronts. Mayor Hausler says preserving the look of the fictional Smallville helped Plano get through the recent economic downturn.

“From 2011 we’ve actually seen our sales tax revenue grow just about every month since then. We’ve had that much economic growth.”

If you visit Plano, you may not meet the superhero known for travelling faster than a speeding bullet. But soon you will be able to visit a Smallville museum in the town’s historic train station. There you will find movie set props and other items related to the filming of “Superman: Man of Steel.” I’m Jim Tedder.



And I'm June Simms. Thanks for listening to As It Is. VOA world news is coming up at the top of the hour, Universal Time.

Have a great weekend!