



**..For Truth, Justice, and
Kellogg's Pep?
Or, *The Adventures Of
Superman Revisited.*
by Elizabeth McLeod**

Lois Lane was my childhood role model. Not the simpering, scheming-to-marry-Superman Lois Lane of the 1960s comics. I'm talking about the gutsy, career-oriented Lois of the earliest episodes of the "Adventures Of Superman" TV series.

Every after-school afternoon, I rushed home to watch reruns of the old George Reeves series -- not so much for that guy in the baggy tights, but for the exciting picture it portrayed of life in a newsroom -- a life that I aspired to for myself.

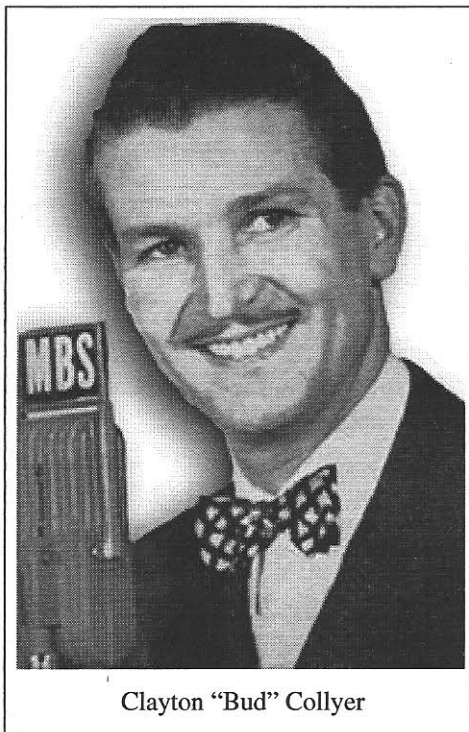
Well, I grew up, and got a job as a reporter. And it wasn't what I expected. But even my disillusionment with real-life-in-the-media didn't dim my deep-down desire to **Be Like Lois**, or my fond memories of "The Adventures of Superman." So, when virtually the entire run of the "Superman" radio series was unearthed in the 1980s, I couldn't wait to hear it. And, I wasn't disappointed.

In general, I'm not a big fan of kids' adventure serials -- the acting and the writing are usually just

too rudimentary to hold my interest. This may have something to do with the fact that I once subjected myself to over a hundred "Jack Armstrong" episodes in sequence over a weekend -- I was simply "jumpin' jiminy gee whizzed" to death. But "Superman" is different -- it's one of the few kids' serials that I think can stand up for an adult audience.

A big part of this is the craftsmanship that went into the show. Producer Robert Maxwell insisted on quality scripts, and writers like George Lowther and Jack Johnstone managed to combine compelling plots with crisp city-room dialogue to give the show

a crackle all its own. (And yes, that's the Jack Johnstone who went on to contribute that same sort of crackle to "Yours Truly Johnny Dollar" in the 1950s.) The casting was especially good. Clayton "Bud" Collyer managed to give Clark Kent and his costumed alter-ego distinctively different personalities -- and managed to make Kent by far the more interesting of the two. Joan Alexander brought a crunchy Rosalind Russell quality to Lois, Julian Noa's cigar-throated bluster was perfect for Perry White, and Jackie Kelk was an appropriately feckless Jimmy Olsen. The sound effects and the direction were equally proficient -- and of course, no announcer ever set a dramatic



Clayton "Bud" Collyer

scene better than Jackson Beck.

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"Superman" started slow. The original syndicated series of the early forties, which was produced at WOR in New York and distributed to a small group of stations under the sponsorship of Hecker's Oats, suffers from glacial pacing. The stories plod along, with the actors seeming quite uncertain in their parts, and overall there's a bit too much "Here I Come To Save The Day" in Superman's manner. The syndications would improve over time, but the series didn't really reach its creative peak until it picked up Kelloggs' Pep as sponsor in January 1943, just four months after moving from syndication to the Mutual network. The Pep era brought Superman and his friends into sharp focus -- and the innovations of that era helped, in turn, to make the characters part of the national mythos. Far more than the comic-book version, the radio Superman is the definitive version of the character. Kryptonite, Jimmy Olsen, Inspector Henderson, "Great Scott!", and the Superman-Batman team -- all came out of the radio program, and have influenced all subsequent versions of the character. This is especially true when you examine the way in which Clark Kent was portrayed -- the original Kent of the 1938-40 comics was derided as "a spineless worm, a weak-livered polecat," and in truth deserved these names. But the radio Kent evolved into a far more dynamic character: a crusading newspaperman who believed passionately in what he was doing, and, one suspects, really didn't *need* super powers to be effective. By the mid-forties, the radio Kent could even be found roughing up reluctant sources -- actions which would have appalled the yellow-bellied comic-book Kent of a few years earlier.

By contrast, the radio Superman was much closer in spirit to the early comic-book version of the character than to what he had become by the mid-forties. Originally, Superman was a New Deal/Labor sort of hero: squinty-eyed and broad-shouldered, looking for all the world like a WPA mural come to life, the original Siegel-and-Shuster character of the late thirties devoted his attentions not to mad scientists or cosmic supervillians but to greedy industrialists and

corrupt politicians. He was a character who delighted in such socially-provocative actions as stranding a bloated mining executive in one of his own unsafe shafts to give him a taste of what the workers had to deal with -- and while the radio Superman never went quite so far, the social conscience remained in evidence. Even after the comic-book Superman had become firmly identified with the Establishment, his radio counterpart devoted plenty of his time to battling greed and corruption. The bigoted political boss "Big George Lattimer" was Superman's most persistent enemy during the late forties, constantly proclaiming his contempt for those "of a different color or different faith," and giving Superman and his friends ample opportunity to battle the Forces Of Hatred.

In the end, it's these socially-relevant episodes that are "Superman's" greatest legacy. Perhaps his epic 1945 battle against the Kryptonite-powered super-Nazi "Atom Man" was more exciting -- and, today, more marketable -- but Superman earned true radio immortality fighting a far more menacing, far more realistic evil.

Repeatedly in 1946 and 1947, Superman took stands for human rights, for equality, and against bigotry and racism -- taking the program where no simple kids' show had ever gone before. Whether battling a Ku-Klux-Klan like racist group or fighting for the rights of unemployed veterans, Superman showed his listeners what it really meant to be a hero.

And, even in our own day and age, it's a lesson well worth repeating.

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, researcher, and freelance writer specializing in radio of the 1930s. She is a regular contributor to "Nostalgia Digest" magazine and the Internet OldRadio Mailing List, maintains a website, Broadcasting History Resources, and is presently researching a book on Depression-era broadcasting. Elizabeth is always looking for 1930s radio recordings in all formats -- uncoated aluminum or lacquer-coated discs, vinyl or shellac pressings, or low-generation tape copies. You can contact her at lizmcl@midcoast.com



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