



## **Metropolis, Illinois: Finding a Childhood Hero**

By Dr. John L. Flynn

Forget Smallville, the fictional home of Jonathan and Martha Kent and their illustrious son Clark (aka Superman). The Massac County Chamber of Commerce and Tourism wants visitors to think of their town as the legendary residence of Kal-El, the last son of Krypton. For over three decades now, the small village of Metropolis, Illinois, has welcomed tourists and curiosity seekers to the one-and-only home of the comic book hero, Superman.

An avid fan of comic books and graphic novels, I had spent most of my childhood in the suburbs of Chicago reading about the adventures of the Man of Steel, and had always assumed that the baby Kal-El was found by the Kents in an Illinois cornfield and raised in a small town just south of where I grew up. As children, we tend to think the world is a great deal smaller than it really is, and that everything of importance happens just over the rainbow in the next county. At 18, with my Superman comics packed

among my other childhood memories, I went off to college out of state, still convinced that my adolescent hero lived not far from my home.

I returned to Chicago, nearly thirty years after I had left, to reclaim that box of beaten and battered memories, and looking through those treasures I remembered Clark Kent and his alter ego Superman. This time, I was determined to find his home, and headed south in a rental car.

Hundreds of miles later, I spied a billboard with the image of Superman pointing the way to downtown Metropolis for motorists entering the city from the east side. Other images of my childhood hero could be found all around this town of less than seven thousand inhabitants, but the most impressive of them all was a fifteen-foot bronze statue in the town square. The statue of their native son was first unveiled on June 5, 1993 to the proud citizens of Metropolis, preceding the town's fifteenth annual Superman Celebration. Built by the same company that created the Emmy statue outside the Academy of Television Arts in Hollywood, the monument stands proudly in full color in front of the courthouse on Superman Square. Tens of thousands have since visited the statue, and it has become a focal point of the small town's revival in both an economic and cultural sense. I, too, stood proudly with my childhood hero, and looked out upon the city with a sense of awe and wonder.

Under the watchful eyes of Superman, and less than a hundred feet away, is one of the most unusual museums on the face of the planet. The Super Museum on Superman Square, run by the Massac County Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, displays Superman collectibles and artifacts from all corners of the globe. Included in the sixty year-old collection are life-size figures of Lois and Clark, Jimmy Olsen, Lex Luthor and

(of course) Superman, original movie props and film production miniatures, gigantic antique toy displays, comic books and much much more. The general admission to the museum is a very reasonably priced \$3.00, and children five and under are free with a paid adult. The museum's gift store, located in the front, has one of the largest selection of currently licensed Superman merchandise this side of Krypton. I purchased a sky blue-colored t-shirt with the Superman logo, and the first time I slipped it on, I felt like I was ten years old again.

Each year, during the second week in June, the town of Metropolis holds its annual Superman Celebration. Most of the activities, centered around the statue of the big guy in Superman Square, reflect the simple traditions of small-town America. The time-honored events include a four-mile run through town, a thirty-mile bicycle tour of Massac County, an arm wrestling tournament, a children's costume pageant and an amateur theatrical production of a Superman drama. And, of course, the real Superman drops into sign autographs and kiss babies. Past celebrants have included Kirk Alyn, Dean Cain, Phyllis Coates, Noel Neill and Jack Larson.

Metropolis, Illinois, helped me regain that sense of awe and wonder that we have as children when we take that first flight of fantasy and believe that heroes live next door.

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