

Wes: Our first story involves a mysterious sketch and the birth of an all-American icon.

Man: Up in the sky! Look! He's the ultimate superhero. It's Superman!

Wes: For generations, the man of steel has captivated audiences of all ages, using his superhuman powers to help those in need. Created in the midst of the depression, Superman caught the country's imagination and never let go. In the decades that followed, Supermania has never subsided. Almost 70 years after first being published, Superman is still one of the most recognizable and most popular characters in the world. Now a woman from Toledo, Ohio, has stumbled onto a drawing that may shed light on a little-known chapter of World War II, when Superman fought propaganda battles against the axis powers. She's hoping the sketch can help her find out more about her deceased father.

Diane Vanskiver Gagel: I realized what it was, and it just surprised me. I thought this might give me some -- another insight into what he experienced as a soldier.

I'm Wes Cowan, and I'm meeting Diane Vanskiver Gagel to hear more about her surprising find.

Diane: I found this in the attic, my mother's attic, rolled up in a tube.

Wes: Well, it looks to me like it's the man of steel, Superman.

Diane: That's it.

Wes: And it's signed, "Best regards to Randall, from Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster." now, who are these guys?

Diane: Well, Randall is my father, Randall Vanskiver, and the two signatures -- my understanding -- are the creators of Superman.

Wes: Now, how did your dad come to have this?

Diane: I really don't know because he died in 1959 when I was a little girl.

Wes: Diane says her dad spent most of his life in the Dayton area. She suspects he may have gotten this in the army during World War II. Do you remember your dad as being a Superman fan?

Diane: Not that I can recall. However, when I was little, I did read the Superman comics.

Wes: Now, what is it exactly that you want me to find out?

Diane: First of all, if it's authentic, it's really a sketch by these gentlemen. Secondly, how would these three individuals, my dad and these two artists, come together?

Wes: It's a great story. Do you mind if I take it with me?

Diane: No, that's fine.

Wes: I'm headed to New York City to meet legendary comic illustrator Jerry Robinson. He worked on the Batman series and created the character the Joker. He was good friends with both Siegel and Shuster. You

were there at the beginning. What was it like back then?

Jerry Robinson: Well, it really was an exciting time.

Wes: Jerry explains how comic books began in New York City during the depression.

Jerry: Almost overnight, the largely Jewish-dominated industry became hugely successful. Like jazz and film, comic books are an American invention. Perhaps we didn't realize the -- the import of it, but we were establishing a new art form. The late 1930s and '40s are considered the golden age of the comic book. Art from this era can be incredibly valuable. In fact, I'm just curating an exhibition at the Jewish Museum here in New York focused on that era.

Wes: Jerry says the pioneers of this new genre became a close-knit group. Now, you knew Siegel and Shuster very well, right?

Jerry: Uh, yeah, they were very good friends and they were wonderful men.

Wes: How did Siegel and Shuster come up with the concept of Superman? Jerry tells me that Siegel and Shuster met in high school in Cleveland, Ohio, in the early 1930s.

Jerry: They began creating comics; Siegel as writer, Shuster as illustrator. In the early '30s, they developed the Superman, a character they reworked and refined for years. Then, in 1934, they had an idea that would change their lives forever. Jerry told me many times about -- he couldn't sleep one night, and this vision came to him of the character of Superman, who was greater than Hercules, faster than a speeding bullet, et cetera. The next morning, they created the first comic strip of the modern Superman. It didn't take them long to come up with his other identity, Clark Kent, but unlike the man of steel, their idea took years to get off the ground. It was turned down everywhere, said it was -- nobody would believe such a fantastic concept. You know, it was so new and different. Finally, in 1938, Superman was featured on the cover of the first issue of action comics. It was almost an instantaneous hit.

Wes: Jerry tells me Superman made millions with a newspaper strip, animated cartoons, a radio show, and endless toys and memorabilia. His success inspired a legion of other comic creations.

Jerry: Superman was the linchpin that started the whole genre of the superhero.

Wes: I'd told Jerry about Diane's drawing, and he's found a similar sketch that Shuster did for him years earlier.

Jerry: And this, I know, was done in the early '40s, in my apartment.

Wes: Jerry's sketch is also a profile in pencil signed by both Siegel and Shuster.

Jerry: And it's -- you can see, it's almost identical; the little touches, the signatures were very similar. It was definitely done by Jerry and Joe.

Wes: Any idea how he might have come by the drawing? Jerry gives me a clue: he says comics were so popular that artists and writers were deluged with requests for drawings and public appearances.

Jerry: We did these things very often for fans.

Wes: Nice to meet you. Joe Mannarino is president of Comic Art Appraisals. Maybe he can help me figure out how Randall could have gotten the drawing. Here's the drawing. Uh, what do you think? Joe immediately spots something a little odd about our sketch.

Joe Mannarino: This is very interesting. This is definitely a Jerry Siegel signature and inscription, but the Joe Shuster signature is very atypical.

Wes: Well, what do you mean, it's atypical? I tell him that Jerry Robinson believed it was signed by Shuster, but Joe has a sketch that has the more common Shuster signature.

Joe: He signed at an angle, he used capital letters.

Wes: He says that Shuster did sometimes use a signature like the one on Diane's sketch, but several of the key details are quite different.

Joe: If pressed, I would not authenticate this as a Joe Shuster signature. But Joe confirms that Diane does have an authentic Shuster sketch. Take a look at the jaw line; it always extends down from the earlobe. Oh, yeah, same thing here. And then the shadow line under the jaw, it was always this very nice s-curve. You can see it right there. Yep, and same thing here.

Wes: While Joe can't account for the odd signature...

Joe: So what you've got here is a mystery.

Wes: He does give me a clue about where Randall may have gotten the sketch: the sketch that Joe has was done during the war.

Joe: Well, this one's interesting because very rarely do we have this type of provenance, but here is an actual envelope that this drawing was sent in, and it says, "Fort Dix, 1944."

Wes: He points out that Randall's drawing seems to have been done rapidly on a sketch pad. It would seem to be that he did this at some sort of an appearance or an event. It's a good lead. A sketch done at a wartime appearance would certainly fit with Diane's idea of how her dad got the image. I'm meeting with comic collector Ethan Roberts. He says that the comic book was a key weapon in the country's propaganda arsenal during the war.

Ethan Roberts: The Jews were being treated very badly by Hitler and singled out for oppression. If you were Jewish and you knew that was happening, wouldn't you want to be involved in the war effort? Of course you would.

Wes: Ethan tells me that Superman even joined the wartime fight himself, if only on comic-book covers.

Ethan: There's a whole set of them that show Superman battling the Japanese, battling the Nazis. On this page, he's opening up a Nazi tank, knocking over a Nazi tank, and here he's confronting Nazis falling out of the sky.

Wes: You know, I assume this is, like, for kids, though, right?

Ethan: A lot of G.I.s went to war with a comic book rolled up in their back pants pocket. In fact, comics sold better during the war than they did any other time in their history.

Wes: But while Superman rallied the troops on the front lines, he also put his superhuman strength to work on the home front. "Let's all back the attack, let's stand by the ones who are manning the guns, and pushing the foe on back." The man of steel was enlisted in civil-defense efforts, school programs, and war-bond campaigns.

Ethan: There would be posters in pharmacies, in candy stores, in haberdashers that would say, "Superman asks you to buy war bonds," and he would sell them. And he would also sell them on comic-book covers on occasion. You can see Superman himself selling bonds, along with Batman and Robin, on some of the covers of world's finest comics.

Wes: Oh, yeah, look at that, "Sink -- sink the -- JapaNazis. JapaNazis with bonds and stamps." and here's "Knock out the axis with bonds and stamps." Ethan tells me that, like other celebrities of the time, Siegel and Shuster also made appearances at war-bond rallies and events for the troops. Siegel and Shuster's studio was in Cleveland; they would go out on bond drives. He says there's a good chance that Diane's sketch might have been done at one of those events.

Ethan: They would, as most celebrities do, sign things or give things to people, and on tour, what do you ask an artist to do? You ask him to do a sketch.

Wes: I've ordered Randall's war records. Was he ever stationed on a base where Shuster and Siegel made a public appearance? This is a dead end. I mean, there's no indication that they ever could have met each other during World War II. I mean, they weren't even in the same places. But the Air Force did send me some things that I think Diane is going to be really interested in seeing, including this great picture of her father in Italy in 1944 and this inter-office memo in which corporal Randall Vanskiver is awarded the good conduct medal. But as far as my investigation goes, I've got to find another angle. If Randall didn't meet up with them during the war, perhaps they connected some other way. All three men were from Ohio. Let me see what I can find out at the Dayton metropolitan library. I know that Randall enlisted in the army in 1943, so what I want to find out is what was he doing right before he joined up? I'm going to look in the Dayton City Directory for 1942. City directories are great because they list a person's occupation. Let's see, Van... Skiver, here we go. Here's Frederick, Gertrude, Mary... Ah, here's Randall. He's listed as a doorman at Keith's R.K.O. Theatre. During World War II, movie theaters played a huge part in promoting our war effort; war bonds were sold in movie theaters. This is potentially a good clue for me. Let me check the Dayton newspapers to see if I can find any other leads. [Death cab for cutie's "Title and Registration" plays] Ah, now here's something. Here's an advertisement for Keith's R.K.O. Theatre. That's the theater where Randall was working as a doorman, and there's a little sub-band here that says, "Avenge December 7th! Buy war bonds here!" So Randall's theater was involved with the war effort. I wonder if there's anything about Siegel and Shuster visiting Dayton as part of a war-bond drive. There's nothing here, but these papers are so hard to look through; they're not indexed or anything. You know, Shuster and Siegel were both from Cleveland; maybe the newspapers from that city will have some leads. I just found something that I think Diane's going to be really interested in. This has been a great story. It involves this great American icon, the Man of Steel, Superman, and it's been fun for me. First I tell Diane that there is some concern about the authenticity of Joe Shuster's signature. Now, I got to tell you, there was no question that the drawing is by Shuster, and it's signed by Siegel and inscribed to your father, so from that standpoint, everybody agrees this is the real McCoy.

Diane: That's great.

Wes: We couldn't find any record her father had crossed paths with Superman's creators during his stint in the army. But in doing that research, I did find a couple things that I think you're going to be very interested in. I show her the photo of her father in Italy in 1944.

Diane: That's my dad, unmistakable.

Wes: Here's something else. This is an original document showing that your dad is being awarded the good conduct medal. The original copy's great. I tell Diane I found out her dad had worked at a movie theater in Dayton, and that I'd made a discovery that may solve her mystery. I found an article that talks about Siegel and Shuster making an appearance at a Cleveland movie theater in 1941. They're there promoting an animated cartoon about Superman, and listen to this. It says that they're setting up their drawing boards in the theater lobby, working on their cartoons and signing autographs.

Diane: That's great.

Wes: Siegel and Shuster were making appearances at Ohio movie theaters at the same time her father was working in a theater.

Diane: It sure seems the most logical explanation.

Wes: Your dad got this working at a movie theater when Shuster and Siegel were involved in promoting either a Superman movie or making an appearance to help the war-bond effort.

Diane: I never realized they went to the theaters like this.

Wes: It's a great piece of American history, and it was fun for me to be involved with it. Can I give you one piece of advice? Keep it away from kryptonite. [Laughs]

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