

A DISPATCH FROM THE 31ST ANNUAL SUPERMAN CELEBRATION IN — WHERE ELSE? — METROPOLIS, ILLINOIS

Each year since 1979, fans of Superman from around the world descend upon Metropolis, a sleepy hamlet (population 6,482) on the banks of the Ohio River at the southern tip of Illinois, to pay their respects to the iconic “Man of Steel.”

Three decades of annual superhero worship haven’t slowed the party at the Superman Celebration, which takes place the second weekend in June and swells Metropolis to 30,000-plus, according to the local chamber of commerce. This year revelers swamped the main drag, Market Street, from Superman Square — over which a fifteen-foot-high Superman statue stands watch — to Ninth Street four blocks away. The streets were lined with trailers and tents, with vendors selling superhero-themed doohickeys and ones that aren’t — everything from carved wooden lawn ornaments to T-shirts and toys. (An entire stand was dedicated to the sale of vegetable peelers.)

If you’d only come for the food, you might’ve closed your eyes and imagined yourself at any county fair, anywhere. But when you look around...

The rich, multichromatic superhero milieu slams you like a brick to the eyeball. It’s not just Superman. (Or should that be Supermen?) Wonder Woman, Batman, Green Arrow and Black Canary — all are present and accounted for, among many others (even a Lex Luthor or two). The people inside the costumes come from lands far and not-so-far, and range in age from a one-month-old Superman to a Popeye in his seventies. They take part in events like Superman Con (think of it as a very-scaled-down Comic-Con), the Supergirl and Superboy pageant and costume contests galore, not to mention a Christian Strength Team, a BMX bike stunt show and carnival rides.

Celebrity guests this year included 88-year-old Noel Neill, who played Lois Lane opposite Kirk Alyn in the first live-action *Superman* (a movie serial filmed in 1948, a decade and a half after writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster created the comic-book character) and in most episodes of TV’s *Adventures of Superman* (1952-’58) with George Reeves. So locally beloved is Neill that the Metropolis Chamber of Commerce intends to erect a life-size bronze statue of their beloved “first lady” — something to look forward to at next year’s celebration.

