

Soupy Sales and the Detroit Experience

Soupy Sales and the Detroit Experience:

*Manufacturing a Television
Personality*

By

Francis Shor

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PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“Francis Shor has done the painstaking research of relating Sales’ evening program, “Soupy’s On,” to the jazz life of Detroit. Many prominent jazz artists appeared on the program when they played in Detroit jazz clubs. This is a most unique and valuable addition to Detroit jazz history.”

—Lars Bjorn

Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of Michigan; author (with Jim Gallert), *Before Motown: A History of Jazz in Detroit*

“An entertaining read about a beloved pop-cultural icon that also captures the complexity of Detroit’s economic, political, and social landscape in the 1950s. This book will change the way you understand Soupy Sales’s humor, the wild popularity of his TV show, and his enduring impact on an entire generation of viewers. This is cultural history with pie-in-the-face explanatory power.”

—Catherine Cangany, PhD

Executive Director, Jewish Historical Society of Michigan; author, *Frontier Seaport: Detroit's Transformation into an Atlantic Entrepôt*

“Mention the name Soupy Sales to any Baby Boomer and you’ll most likely be met with a huge smile and a memory of one of his whacky shows that appealed as much to adults as they did to children. But few know about the early days in Soupy’s career, and the soil into which the seeds of his comic sensibilities were planted. Francis Shor does a terrific job of chronicling Soupy’s early days in television, especially those important Detroit years, before he made it to Los Angeles and then New York, where he created some of his most memorable characters. Shor makes a compelling case for placing Sales squarely in the pantheon of other legendary TV comedians like Pinky Lee and Milton Berle.”

—Charles Salzberg

Co-Author (with Soupy Sales), *Soupy Sez: My Life and Zany Times* and twice-nominated Shamus Award author of the Henry Swann series

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For feedback on specific chapters and overall technical help, I want to thank three former colleagues, Lisa Alexander, Tom Klug, and Marie Sweetman.

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While I was completing the first draft of the manuscript, my 100 year-old father, Martin Shor, passed away. I dedicate this book to his memory.

INTRODUCTION

On a certain Saturday morning in the fall of 1959 I happened to be home in the suburban community just outside Pittsburgh where our family resided. Apparently, my junior high football team, to which I belonged as a first-string defensive back and second-string receiver, did not have a game. There must not have been any other outdoor activities with friends that required my participation that morning. So, with nothing much to do beyond a few chores, I gravitated to the living room and turned on the television set. The TV was situated in a strategic corner that could be seen from all points in the living room and even from the steps that led up to the second story bedrooms. I would often sneak down these stairs, hidden from my parents' view, to watch those programs that were broadcast past my bedtime, like *The Tonight Show*, first with Steve Allen and then Jack Paar, until my brother would call downstairs to my parents, alerting them to my skulking TV transgressions.

As the noon hour approached on this particular Saturday, I switched the channel to the local ABC affiliate. I'm not sure if I was previously alerted to what was scheduled for that time or it was just the serendipity of random selection. However, when *Lunch with Soupy Sales* began with a crazy sounding piano, followed by a guy wearing a big floppy bowtie and a slightly skewed top hat, I was riveted. What flashed before my eyes for the next nearly thirty minutes was a procession of slapstick bits that were not only funny, but also, given my own teenage goofiness, strangely *simpatico* and maybe, dare I say, subversive from a cultural if not political perspective.

Among those silly but mesmerizing acts performed was a bizarrely engaging exchange between this Soupy guy and a creature represented by a woolly white paw that he called "White Fang," aka "the meanest dog in the world." The incongruity of a dog of that stature with one appendage waving back and forth while the attached voice from off camera made noises sounding like "LoLoLo!" was absolutely and hysterically humorous. Added to the mayhem that transpired between this "White Fang" and Soupy were several interruptions from a next-door neighbor knocking on the makeshift door of this rickety-looking

set. Again, only a hand was visible while the angry fellow ranted about something and then threw a pie in poor Soupy's face.

It seemed that this bedlam began to subside when Soupy sat down at a lunch table decked out with food items like a grilled cheese sandwich, some potato chips, a glass of milk, and a molded Jell-O desert. As Soupy prepared to consume each and every part of the midday meal, a sound effect would accompany its ingestion. For milk, there was a "mooring" sound and for the Jell-O, an inexplicable "boinging" noise would come with the wiggling plated gelatin that Soupy shook in a close-up for the camera. Advising his youthful audience to have our lunch with him, Soupy's invitation seemed as genuine as the endless commercials for Jell-O seemed a little artificial, as artificial as the food coloring that gave the gelatin a glowing translucent look. Throughout the show Soupy promoted Jell-O and implored his young viewers to beseech their mothers to purchase said item next time she went to the grocery store.

While I could neglect these entreaties for enlisting my Mom to buy Jell-O, especially since she worked and I ate my fill of Jell-O deserts at the prepared school lunches, I was particularly fascinated and amused by the use of silent films during the program. Most intriguing, beyond the novelty of these old time movies, was Soupy's narration which relied heavily on wordplay. The puns that punctuated the characters and plot of these slapstick films endeared me entirely to Soupy's humor. I can still recall one of those funny lines he uttered in his voice-over. As a Model T automobile struggled without much success to negotiate a hill, he commented jocularly: "There goes a Rolls-Knardley. Rolls down one hill and can hardly make it up the next."

I couldn't wait to share what I saw and heard that Saturday on Monday morning with my buddies at school. A few of them had also watched the program and we immediately bonded by repeating some of the lines from Soupy's narration and parts of the routines that we found particularly hilarious. We also established what would become a kind of secret code among us faithful viewers. To the bemusement or disgust of the unknowing others in our junior high hallways, we would often call out to each other with the White Fang voice, "LoLoLo," while flailing our right arm in demonstrable ways that only we, the initiated in Soupy Sales *shticks*, would fully comprehend.

Although the previous reminiscences of *Lunch with Soupy Sales* are tinged with nostalgia, this book is not intended as a breezy fan catalogue of Soupy's shows, especially since practically all the videos or kinescopes of those shows from the 1950s were destroyed. While I

do not propose to diminish the importance of audience reception, including my own, such viewership needs to be put in the context of those critical perspectives provided by cultural and media studies. As will be seen initially in the chapter outlines below and then throughout each of the specific individual chapters, these perspectives will inform the subject areas covered in this book that include memory, child development, broadcasting history, Cold War and consumerist ideology, television programming, comedy, Jewish humor and comics, jazz, and Detroit socio-cultural history during the 1950s. All of these seemingly disparate topics, however, lead back to identifying the manufacturing of a television personality at a particular moment in time and in a specific location. Soupy Sales, thus, becomes a figure who reflects the socio-economic, ideological, and cultural meanings of a television personality refracted through the Detroit experience in the 1950s.

Such a critical examination of this particular television personality is not intended to detract from or minimize the humor and entertainment ethos embedded in Soupy's shows. Hopefully, this book can negotiate those hazardous, but essential, theoretical and methodological approaches and the attendant language without sacrificing the pleasures elicited in following Soupy Sales in his entertaining Motor City journeys in the 1950s.

Chapter One, "Manufacturing 'Soupy Sales,'" attempts to reconstruct a historical narrative of the television personality who would become "Soupy Sales" at the age of twenty-seven when he began working in 1953 on WXYZ-TV in Detroit. Assessing his memoir, co-authored by Charles Salzberg, and other recollections that can be found in print and on video through the lens of memory studies will provide a necessary opportunity to explore the social and cultural conditions that shaped Soupy from his birth up until he arrived in the Motor City. Reviewing those biographical influences that informed his life story will help locate his public persona as an entertainer, as well as taking account of historical context within which Soupy emerged.

The manufacturing of "Soupy Sales" cannot be separated from the medium that gave him a prominence in popular culture and produced a fan base, especially among kids during those early years of 1950s television. As a developing technology and business institution founded on commercial values, television will be the focus on Chapter Two, "TV and Popular Culture in the 1950s." Television both reflected and refracted popular culture, creating in the process programs that attracted audiences who, in turn, incorporated and transformed the

meanings embedded in those shows for their own lives. The critical insights gleaned from the works on television, media, and popular culture studies will be deployed in order to illuminate those social and cultural connotations of 1950s television.

When my friends and I re-enacted the comedic routines we saw on Soupy's lunchtime program, we were not only manifesting our pleasure in what we viewed, but also refracting the various meanings that television and popular culture provided. Understanding the attraction to and re-enactment of this style of comedy, from slapstick to wordplay, with its ties to Jewish television jesters like Milton Berle and Sid Caesar, will be a critical part of this chapter, particularly because of the kinds of humor and comedy *shticks* that regaled audiences on the Berle and Caesar television shows and inspired Soupy in a variety of ways. Accounting for those comedic influences on Soupy and his humor will incorporate those studies of Jewish comedians and comedy by such scholars as Arthur Asa Berger, Lawrence J. Epstein, and Ruth Wisse, among others.

Although we might have been oblivious to deeper social influences of the surrounding culture, Chapter Two will investigate those structural influences that fashioned family life along class and gender lines, especially in the domesticated Cold War and consumerist environment of the times. The conclusion of this chapter will focus on one of the most watched television program for kids of the 1950s – the *Mickey Mouse Club*. What values permeated that program and its contrast to Soupy's style will be highlighted.

Chapter Three, "The Detroit Experience in the 1950s," will consider the political and popular culture contexts within which Soupy's 1953-1960 television programs were situated. Beyond the somewhat insular world of television programming and against its deliberate neglect of the larger economic, political and social forces driving conditions in the Motor City, this chapter will provide a more inclusive sense of what was happening in Detroit during this time period. While Soupy viewed Detroit as his "Mecca" for giving him a television platform from which he gained an incredible following, for others, especially African Americans, the 1950s in Detroit were fraught with racial tensions and persistent discrimination in employment, housing, and criminal justice. Utilizing the studies of Detroit in the 1950s by Daniel Clark, Thomas Sugrue, Heather Ann Thompson, and other urban and social historians should help to give a more critical and enlarged context for what constituted multiple and different experiences. In particular, as the manufacturing hub of the nation in

the 1950s, the production of television programming and TV personalities reflected and refracted the contradictory social forces at play in Detroit.

This chapter will also consider those who, like Soupy, arrived to Detroit in the 1950s, bringing with them a different life story and alternative trajectory. The biographies and autobiographies of people like Grace Lee Boggs, a political activist of the left who entered the Detroit scene the same year as Soupy, and Arthur Johnson, the newly appointed Director of the Detroit branch of the NAACP, the largest branch in the country, will offer a better understanding of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the Motor City experience. The insecurities of autoworkers in the erratic employment situation of the Big Three during the 1950s, especially as those corporations began their long march to the suburbs and beyond, will afford the necessary counterpoint to Soupy's rise to prominence and the economic benefits that he accrued with his growing popularity. Also, because Soupy relied on showcasing jazz and popular musicians on his evening program, *Soupy's On* (discussed in much more detail in Chapter Five), the jazz scene, in particular, covered so extensively in Lars Bjorn's *Before Motown* and in part of Mark Stryker's *Jazz from Detroit*, will play a significant role in filling out the political, social, and cultural landscape of the Detroit experience in the 1950s.

During his time on WXYZ-TV, Soupy had a variety of daytime shows that spanned the early morning hours to the noon hour to the early evening. That early evening time slot turned out to be an ABC syndicated summer replacement for the *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie* show during July and August in 1955. The *Lunch with Soupy Sales* ran for a year and a half on ABC television with the final three months of the broadcast coming from Los Angeles. Unfortunately, there are only a few remaining tapes of any of those shows that have been posted publically on either YouTube or other websites. Those scarce postings, nonetheless, will allow for extensive analysis of their content. Additionally, his memoirs, the entry in *TV Land Detroit*, and other archival sources provide both contemporaneous and retrospective commentary. To supplement this material I have extracted relevant material from two-dozen Detroit area residents who responded to my questionnaire about their recollections of his shows and related matter. Finally, archival entries from newspapers of the time, especially the *Detroit Free Press*, will form a significant segment of Chapter Four, "Soupy's Daytime TV Shows."

Chapter Five, "Soupy's Evening TV Program," focuses on the 11 P.M. WXYZ-TV program called, *Soupy's On*. As with the daytime shows, there is a dearth of visual material from either the fifteen minute or thirty minute versions. A few snippets of jazz performances can be found on various websites. Among these are two songs by legendary trumpeter Clifford Brown a few months before his fatal car accident on June 26, 1956 (the only taped appearance of Brown that's known to exist which also became part of the Ken Burns PBS series on *Jazz*) and Earl Garner shortly after the release of his phenomenally successful 1955 jazz album, *Concert by the Sea*. However, by searching through the TV listings in the *Detroit Free Press* and cross-checking these with local appearances by nationally famous jazz artists performing in Motor City jazz venues, this chapter will reconstruct the musical content of *Soupy's On* and the amazing cavalcade of musicians who performed on that evening show.

Supplementing the account of the musicians and sketch comedy routines on *Soupy's On* will be eyewitness reports of what transpired, several interviews of those connected to the show, and a review of some of the scripts from the comic routines. Among those interviews are the lively reflections by guitarist Joe Messina concerning a number of jazz performers on the show. Joe played in the resident Hal Gordon band on Soupy's evening program and would later achieve his own distinction as a member of the celebrated "Funk Brothers" of Motown fame. Finally, the discussion of Soupy's skits for his evening show will rely on archival material, published commentary by those involved, and interviews with relatives of those who helped to create and perform in those sketches.

Soupy and his producers aggressively marketed his shows, as evident in ads and stories on the TV and other pages of the *Detroit Free Press*. In addition, he kept up a frenetic pace of public appearances from Jewish War Veterans events to emceeding jazz concerts to the Saturday morning promotion of his fan clubs, the Birdbaths, at local Detroit movie theatres. Tracking these myriad public presentations will be the primary subject matter in Chapter Six, "Public Persona and Private Life." Beyond identifying his role in shaping his public persona, this chapter will probe the ways that the public consumed his television personality and the way his career intruded on his private life. The reconstruction of all of these events should also help explain how he achieved such prominence and became one of the most popular television personalities and an entertainment celebrity in the Motor City. As an entertainment celebrity, Soupy Sales "promises

to help us comprehend celebrity as a general cultural phenomena: its peculiar dynamics, its place in everyday lives, (and) its broader implications” (Gamson 1994: 3). As we will see in this chapter, that entertainment celebrity status was achieved by the manufacturing of Soupy’s television personality built on “promotion, publicity, and performance” (Bennett 2011: 18).

Chapter Seven, “Detroit Afterimages,” briefly recounts Soupy’s television career after he left Detroit. After a short time in Los Angeles from 1961-1962, he wound up in New York where his 1964-1966 ABC program, *The Soupy Sales Show*, had national syndication. He also did a variety of television turns on syndicated shows that spanned the late 1960s and 1970s, like *What’s My Line*, and into the early 1980s with *Sha Na Na*. He returned periodically to Detroit to perform at annual telethons and at a variety of clubs where an early image of innocent child-like behavior morphed into a stand-up comic whose jokes relied on more adult content.

The “Conclusion” will attempt to assess the legacy that remains so much a part of 1950s television and popular culture in the Motor City. The fond memories that many Detroiters retain of Soupy Sales’ time in Detroit are not only a testament to his impact, but also to the ways a past, formed in childhood by television and popular culture, continues to resonate in the lives of so many older adults. Apparently, given the number of websites now incorporating his shows, Soupy still manages to attract a passionate following, one that deserves the kind of affectionately critical examination that this book, hopefully, represents.

Finally, in order to pay homage to the kind of jokes that Soupy told and humor he performed, there will be a number of gags and funny stories sprinkled throughout the text. In that regard, let me conclude this introduction with a gag that Soupy included in his compilation of jokes and funny stories, called *Stop Me If You’ve Heard It!*

Two goats are busy eating garbage. While they’re eating, one of them finds a roll of old film and proceeds to eat it up. After he finishes chewing up the film, the other goat asks him, “Did you enjoy the film?”

And the other goat says, “Actually, I preferred the book!” (Sales 2003: 153)

I realize there is no way that this book can match Soupy’s ebullience and zaniness on film. However, here’s hoping that this book may be a tasty read and provide sustenance for those who are interested in better comprehending the life and times of Soupy Sales, especially during those seven seminal years in Detroit when he became one of the Motor City’s pre-eminent television personalities.

CHAPTER ONE

MANUFACTURING “SOUPY SALES”

Born on January 8, 1926 in Franklinton, North Carolina to Irving and Sadie Berman Supman, Milton Supman would begin his twenty-seven year journey to becoming Soupy Sales. That manufacturing of a television and public persona known as “Soupy Sales” would happen in 1953 shortly after his arrival in Detroit. (The name would remain with him until his death in New York City on October 22, 2009.) Indeed, Soupy Sales was, in certain respects, as much a manufactured product as any other that rolled off the assembly line throughout the Motor City, albeit less mechanical and standardized and more organic and idiosyncratic. In effect, Soupy’s experiences prior to Detroit equipped him with a self-inventing agency that would serve as a platform for the manufacturing of a television personality par excellence. However, the selling of Soupy Sales as a television personality required endearing himself to an audience and creating a fan base that relied not only on his TV persona but also relentless efforts to be part of the cultural life of Detroit. Tracing the physical and psychological passages traversed by Milton Supman in becoming Soupy Sales will help locate the biographical content and historical and social contexts for that pre-figuring journey to Detroit.

The physical passage is, perhaps, easier to demarcate than the psychological one. Leaving his birthplace in North Carolina after the death of his father in 1931 and remarriage of his mother in 1934, Milton accompanied her and his new stepfather, Felix Goldstein, to Huntington, West Virginia. Graduating high school in Huntington, he would enlist in the navy in 1943 when he was seventeen. Much like millions of other young men during World War II, his service uprooted him from his small-town background and opened up a wider world, punctuated by the terrors of the war in the Pacific. Returning to Huntington after the war, he took advantage of the G. I. Bill to continue his education at Marshall College (now University) in Huntington. From Huntington, he pursued a career in radio and television that

took him first to Cincinnati from 1950-1951 and then Cleveland from 1951-1953 before landing in Detroit in 1953 to emerge as the television personality known as “Soupy Sales.”

However, it is the psychological passages he navigated in becoming that public persona which provide intriguing insights into the first twenty-seven years of the Soupy Sales life story. As noted by the author of “The Psychology of Life Stories,” they “are based on biographical facts, but they go considerably beyond the facts as people selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both the past and future to construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences” (McAdams 2001: 101). For Soupy, in particular, the re-telling of his life story was more than an effort to “interpret certain memories as self-defining” (McAdams 2001: 110). He deployed some of those memories, including manufactured ones, specifically to entertain and impress his audience.

Memories, as innumerable social psychologists and cognitive scientists have confirmed, are fallible. Indeed, the well-known neurologist and author, Oliver Sacks, contends that our “earliest memories, in particular, are susceptible to ‘transference’ from what one actually experienced to something profoundly significant but without any experiential foundation” (Sacks 2017: 105). This is especially relevant in tracking the earliest memories of the young Milton Supman in North Carolina and discerning the difference between what Sacks calls “narrative truth” as opposed to “historical truth” (Sacks 2017: 119).

In trying to decipher the distinctions between the narrative and historical truths of Soupy’s life stories of his earliest memories, I will be relying on the memoir, *Soupy Sez: My Life and Zany Times* (2001), co-authored by Charles Salzberg. (All further page citations will be from this text.) Many of these stories are replicated, like rehearsed scripts, in other published and taped interviews with Soupy. As Salzberg told me in an email exchange concerning the process of constructing Soupy’s memoir, his debilitated condition and evident physical impairments at the age of seventy-four when the memoir was written required prompting during Salzberg’s interviews with Soupy and filling in any gaps with interviews with friends and family. Even in the absence of a diagnosis of any cognitive problem that may have afflicted Soupy at the time, it is evident that the normal functioning of memory produces distortions, pseudo-reminiscences, and confabulations (Schacter, *et. al.* 2011 and Schnider 2018). My intention in attempting to establish the historical truth underlying any of the distortions and

confabulations in Soupy's memoir is not to challenge the authenticity of his narrative truth; rather, it is to provide a more complete historical, social, and cultural context within which his life stories resonate.

Before examining some of those earliest life stories recounted by Soupy, it seems appropriate, if not a little disconcerting, to interject a related joke about memory, one that honors the comedic sensibility that informed his memoirs and his life.

A hyena is drinking at the watering hole one day when he sees an elephant approaching for a drink. Close to the water, the elephant stops short and inspects a turtle for a few seconds. Then the elephant rears back and kicks the turtle, making it fly the better part of a mile.

The hyena asks, "What did you do that for?"

"Well," answers the pachyderm, "About seventy years ago that turtle bit my foot. Today, I finally found that SOB and paid him back."

"Seventy years! How in the name of heaven could you remember what it looked like after that many years?"

The elephant replied: "I have turtle recall!" (adapted from Sales 2003: 160)

In looking back at those early years of his life, Soupy obviously could not even approximate total recall. He could and did, however, lace his recollections with jokes and what I would call comedic confabulations. Such comedic confabulations were efforts to translate mundane or traumatic biographical moments into amusing vignettes that deliberately distorted those moments in order to get a laugh from his audience. In effect, Soupy's comedic confabulations became a self-manufacturing process for humorous purposes. As he jokingly recounts, his birth in Franklinton, North Carolina was "primarily because I wanted to be near my mother" (13). This was also probably true for his older brothers, Leonard, born in 1918 and Jack born in 1920. Another brother born in 1916 died the same year Jack was born. According to Soupy, all the living brothers were given nicknames. For Leonard it was "Hambone" (oy, hardly kosher!), for Jack it was "Chickenbone" (14), and for Soupy, the leftover seemed to be "Soupman," eventually to become "Soupy." Actually, it wasn't until his entrance into the media world after leaving Franklinton and Huntington that he would become "Soupy." Prior to this time, he was nicknamed "Suppy" Supman.

While Soupy kidded about wanting “to be near his mother” for his birth, he reveals nothing about her background or his father’s in his memoir. A limited online search in a few genealogy sites revealed the bare outlines of the family background. His father was born in Hungary in 1890 and came to the United States with his family. His mother was apparently born in Baltimore in 1897 to Etta and Max Berman, both Jewish immigrants from Russia who were part of the massive wave of Jewish immigration to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that also brought the Supman family to the country. His mother and father met and married in Baltimore, but moved to North Carolina after World War I, following Irving’s brother for a better economic opportunity. When Irving died on September 23, 1931 at the age of forty-one, his body was returned to Baltimore and buried at the B’nai Israel Congregation Cemetery.

Irving and Sadie Supman settled in the small town of Franklinton with a population somewhere between 1200 and 1500 with nary another Jewish family or person in sight. The business they established was a dry goods store they called the “Wonder Department Store.” If you’re wondering why this Jewish couple would move to a remote part of North Carolina to begin a dry goods business, Soupy doesn’t supply an answer. He does, however, offer some jocular cultural commentary from his retrospective comedic lens by noting “if it weren’t for bowling, Franklinton wouldn’t have any culture at all” (14) and “the main street ran through a car wash” (19).

But it was the pervasive prejudice that animates the recollections of his time in North Carolina in Soupy’s memoir, linking it to his later reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and his identification with the kids in that novel. Although recounting the grim racist environment of this period, Soupy, nonetheless, constructs a comedic confabulation of his life story to mitigate the prejudice he and his family may have encountered. Joking that his parents sold the Ku Klux Klan its sheets (15), Soupy returns again and again to this comedic confabulation throughout his life, including what can be seen on YouTube in his interview with the fellow comedian, Robert Klein. Stretching even the meaning of narrative truth, Soupy’s references to the KKK also contradict many of the historical truths we know about the resurgence of the KKK after WWI and through the early to mid-1920s (MacLean 1994 and Gordon 2017).

The so-called Second Coming of the KKK in the 1920s was not just limited to the South. Outside the South, the KKK exerted tremendous political and cultural influence in Mid-western states, like Indiana,

Western states, like Colorado and Oregon, and cities throughout those regions. In Detroit there were massive rallies of tens of thousands of KKK members whose contender for mayor in 1924 momentarily won the election as a write-in candidate before losing in a recount. Coinciding with renewed white supremacy, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, the latter particularly pernicious in creating the social-psychological conditions experienced emotionally by the young Soupy, the KKK actually exhausted its dominant influence outside the South by the time Milton Supman was born in 1926. Even in North Carolina, there were no evident chapters of the KKK in Franklinton. This did not, however, diminish the racist and anti-Semitic atmosphere surrounding him and his family.

In particular and at variance with Soupy's comedic confabulation about his family selling the KKK its sheets, Jews were particular targets of the KKK (Gordon 2017: 49-54) and other anti-Semites like Henry Ford and his notorious Michigan-based newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*. According to historian Linda Gordon, "Jews functioned in Klan discourse to resolve contradictory attitudes towards capitalism and commercialism - by projecting lust for money onto 'the Jew,' Klansmen could adjudge their own profit-seeking as honorable" (Gordon 2017: 61). This profit seeking included the manufacturing of their Klan costumes. KKK members were required to purchase their outfits through the organization (Gordon 2017: 66). So, Soupy's obvious attempt at comedy when it came to the KKK and his family was one of those manufactured confabulations that relied upon the incongruity factor (an essential element of humor as we will see in later chapters) while relieving, perhaps, some painful memories from his childhood.

One of those memories related in *Soupy Sez* was a lynching of a Black man by the KKK. The story that Soupy recounts details the fight between the manager of the local movie theater and a Black patron. From Soupy's retelling of the incident a "violent altercation" occurred when the manager, Mr. Brown, a neighbor of the Supmans, attempted to eject the man for smoking in the area that comprised the segregated section of the theatre, namely the balcony. In the ensuing altercation the manager was thrown to his death. Although the alleged perpetrator was arrested, the KKK snatched him and lynched him from a telephone pole in the center of town. According to Soupy, "This gruesome spectacle left an indelible impression on me. I can still see that man swinging from that telephone pole with the cigarette butt

dangling from his mouth, as vividly as if it all happened just last week” (15).

While there may have been an actual lynching that the young Milton Supman observed in Franklinton, North Carolina, there is no evidence from the historical record that this or any such lynching incident took place when Soupy was a child there. In fact, it appears that Soupy was mistakenly mixing up in his memory a similar event that happened in Franklinton in 1919 – seven years before Soupy was born. Some of the details of that incident conform to those presented in Soupy’s account. There was a Mr. Brown who was the manager of the Franklinton movie theater. Brown did get into an argument with a Black patron, Powell Green. What transpired next, according to the historical record, was that Brown called the police to arrest Green. As the police tried to lead Green to prison, Brown physically attacked Green. Trying to protect himself, Green managed to wrest a gun from his coat whereupon he shot and killed Brown. As an angry mob formed, police attempted to spirit Green out of town, only to be blocked by a car on the outskirts of the city. The men inside that car exited their automobile and caught Green as he endeavored to escape. They affixed a rope around his neck and dragged him behind the car after which they hung him from a tree (Newkirk 2008: 39-40).

What Soupy appears to exhibit in his own compelling recollection of this story is a kind of false memory, manufactured from those areas of the brain that make it difficult to distinguish actual experiences from imagined ones (Schacter *et. al.* 2011). Given the connections Soupy is making to the emotional horrors of prejudice in his childhood, it is not surprising that a certain manufactured memory becomes part of his reconstruction and re-imagining of the past. As Sacks contends, “Once such a story or memory is constructed, accompanied by a vivid sensory image and strong emotion, there may be no inner, psychological way of distinguishing true from false, nor any outer, neurological way” (Sacks 2017: 120).

Nevertheless, the very real memory of his father’s death at the age of forty-one by tuberculosis when Soupy was only five becomes an instance to acknowledge the impact of that loss. As he attests, “His death affected me very much, because after that, I didn’t really have very much of a family life” (16). Is it, therefore, any wonder that the quest for recognition and acceptance could be correlated with the sense of abandonment the young Soupy felt? It is also instructive that what he characterizes as the “pivotal event of my life” – “playing the title role in my elementary school production of ‘Peter Rabbit’” –

happens during this time. Reflecting on the "laughing and clapping" that ensued during his performance and how it would become a necessity in his life, he even hazards a psychoanalytic interpretation for why he may require the "constant reassurance, constant demonstrations of love" that being a comedian and performer would give him. "I knew that entertaining people (although only six at the time) was going to be my life" (17).

His life would begin to blossom as a consequence of the move from Franklinton to Huntington, West Virginia in 1934, a town with almost fifty times more people than the remote hamlet in North Carolina. In fact, the Jewish population of Huntington around the time of the move was about equal (1200) to Franklinton's total inhabitants. There were even two Jewish congregations although whether his family was a member of either one is unclear. What is clear, however, is that Soupy "took to Huntington like a duck to water" (18). If Soupy had felt like an ugly duckling in Franklinton because of the loss of his father and his Jewish background, Huntington provided a more hospitable environment, especially when it came to social interaction with other kids.

One of those childhood friends from Huntington, Bill Cravens, recalls that when Soupy moved into his neighborhood they immediately found a way to showcase Soupy's budding comedic talents. According to Cravens, "we used to put on shows for the neighborhood kids in his garage. I was the straight man and he was the comedian" (21). Cravens further remarks that Soupy would "send his joke material to comedians like Bob Hope and Red Skelton" (21). Although there was no indication that either responded to Soupy's comedic offers, it seems that Skelton, as the character of "Freddie the Freeloader," may have influenced Soupy's use of the battered top-hat that became part of his costume later on his lunchtime television program on WXYZ-TV in Detroit in the 1950s.

Soupy's own recollections from his school days in Huntington underscore how he was "an inveterate class cutup...with a little more personality than most" (22). While self-conscious about his appearance, Soupy, in the self-deprecating mode that would stamp his comedic persona and lead eventually to taking thousands of pies in the face, observes "if you looked like I did then you had to be funny" (22). Beyond the employment of facial expressions to convey humor, Soupy absorbed the physical comedy of the Marx Brothers and their "anarchic mayhem," (23) a mayhem that was integral to the slapstick *shticks* on Soupy's television shows in the 1950s and 1960s.

It was in high school where Soupy began to experiment with standup comedy, “stealing bits” (23) from other well-known comedians. Relying on radio and the movies to help develop his timing and delivery, he would use a variety of venues in and out of school to attract an audience and the acceptance and recognition that went with performing. Wordplay, in particular, was part of his standup comedy and would continue to be essential to his act and later television shows. One example of such wordplay that he recalls from those high school standup times is the following: “My mother and father are in the iron and steel business. My mother irons and my father steals” (24).

While comedy was the driving force behind his desire to perform, Soupy also dabbled in playing the clarinet and being an amateur journalist by “reviewing movies and bands” for the school newspaper (25). His love of swing music in this era of big band jazz would remain a constant in his life whether as a disc jockey on various radio stations from Cleveland to New York City or in what would become a very popular evening program on Detroit’s WXYZ-TV, *Soupy’s On*, that featured nationally prominent jazz musicians who were appearing at Motor City clubs or concert venues. Soupy was both a fan of the music and, as attested to later by others, an incredibly knowledgeable *aficionado* of big bands, jazz ensembles and soloists. According to one of his high school friends, Betty Ann Keen, she and Soupy “formed a fan club for the Jerry Wald Orchestra” (24) – a lesser known clarinetist who, like the much better known Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman, led a swing jazz band. Wald’s aggregation, consisting of four trumpets, four trombones, and five saxophones, plus, of course, a rhythm section, had a large number of Jewish musicians, which may have also been an attraction for Soupy. His love of the music was further reinforced by his infatuation with swing dancing. Those dance steps would most likely make their reappearance in what emerged as the “Soupy Shuffle” on his WXYZ-TV noontime television show to be followed later in the national syndication of that show.

When he graduated Huntington High School in 1943, he immediately began classes at Marshall College located in Huntington. Continuing his journalism as a not very conscientious sports writer for the Marshall College student newspaper, his byline as “Suppy” Supman would appear only periodically. According to Soupy, the sports editor told him that he “was spending too much time delivering punch lines and not enough collecting bylines” (25). However, his career as a cub journalist and college student was cut short when he

enlisted in the Navy at the age of seventeen after only one term at college.

The physical and psychological transition from a rather carefree environment to one wrought with the terrors of war had a profound impact on Soupy. Although he proffers the cliché that "the day I entered the Navy was the day I became a man" (29), his time in basic training and in service in the Pacific were punctuated by tragic moments that would remain, like an anchor (excuse the pun), to his generally buoyant personality. One of those moments which was too painful to describe was a "terrible airplane accident" (29) that happened during basic training in San Diego. Such moments represent what one neuroscientist calls "flashbulb memories," or ones that have such strong "emotional reactions" that they retain importance for one's life story (Schnider 2018: 176-7).

Soupy's reluctance to provide the specifics for that accident may also represent the trauma such an incident engendered. Without any more documentary references to the specifics or the actual time frame, I can only hazard a guess about the details. Given what exists in the military records and the particular time frame for Soupy's basic training, it appears that the horrific event took place on June 6, 1944 at the Naval Auxiliary Air Station in Kearny Mesa, just north of San Diego, where a navy plane crashed on takeoff killing eighteen and injuring another twelve. There was also a later crash that occurred shortly after takeoff from Lindbergh Field in San Diego on November 22, 1944 that killed all six of the crew onboard. Salzberg notes that Soupy's fear of flying is attributable to being part of a clean-up detail after that accident or the earlier one or one not in the military record but in Soupy's reconstructed memory of several different events (30).

Once Soupy began his service as a Seaman, First Class, on the U. S. S. *Randall*, an attack transport ship launched in 1944, he experienced many frightening moments. It is possible that the stories he recounts about serving during the invasion of Okinawa have the ring of narrative truth without accurately reflecting the historical truth of the role of the U. S. S. *Randall*. Apparently, that ship did transport men and material for the horrifying campaigns at Iwo Jima, Guam, and eventually Okinawa. However, that ship did not arrive in Okinawa until after the appalling atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Soupy also claims that the *Randall* "delivered the first atomic bomb to the Bikini atoll" (30). While the Bikini atoll was used for atomic and nuclear weapons, the testing did not start until after WWII in 1946. So, understandably, Soupy's recollections of the

exploits of his ship during his time in the Navy blend into those embellished and even manufactured memories that often form part of any person's life stories.

On the other hand, Soupy's "warm memories" of being in the navy during WWII are rooted in "the wonderful camaraderie" and "bonds of friendship" experienced during his time onboard the ship (30). It was on the *Randall* where he also was able to entertain the other sailors "via the ship's onboard intercom" (30). Those performances, consisting mainly of telling jokes and playing music, would later become part of his regular repertoire on radio and television. Especially significant to his identity as a performer in children's television programming as "Soupy Sales" on WXYZ-TV in Detroit was his invention of the character of White Fang, an imaginary dog based on Jack London's character of the same name but having the growls and howls found on the V-Disc of the *Hound of the Baskervilles*. Admitting that he purloined the disc when he left the navy, Soupy claims that it was in Detroit where someone stole it from him (31).

Returning to Huntington after his naval service, Soupy continued his college education at Marshall and his radio and stand-up comedy performances. Those stand-up gigs were at dive bars in West Virginia and Ohio towns that were, in Soupy's words, "pretty seamy." He jokingly recalls that they "were the kinds of places where they played the 'Star Spangled Banner' every fifteen minutes just to see who could still stand up" (33). Elsewhere he observes that "joke telling (what we call stand-up comedy today) fell somewhere between taking tickets and cleaning up after the circus elephants on the show business hierarchy...Stand-up comics told their jokes in bars and speakeasies. I know because I experienced it first hand" (Sales 2003: 123).

One of those seedy places at which he performed stand-up comedy that he identified as his "first professional gig...was in a bar in Mansfield, Ohio, called the Ringside." Although Soupy claims it was named that because "heavyweight-boxing champ Rocky Marciano once came in for an evening" (Sales 2003: 124), it is difficult to either verify the story or, indeed, even the time line. What has some historical validity is that Rocky Marciano was heavyweight champion in the late 1940s through the early 1950s. (In fact, Marciano defeated Detroit's own magnificent heavyweight champion, Joe Louis, on October 27, 1951 in Louis's last match of an otherwise stellar and significant boxing career.)

Although these performances took place under rather challenging circumstances, Soupy honed his skill at one-liners and contending

with the heckling that sometimes interrupted his act. Once while emceeding for a stripper at the Ringside who insisted that he gather up the silver dollars thrown onstage for her, he wound up getting into a physical altercation with an irate patron who did not appreciate either Soupy's act or his comeback to the heckling. Actually, the fight, according to Soupy, was more of a first-round knockout since the guy floored Soupy with one punch, a punch that had the audience in stitches while he recovered from his injuries in the dressing room. As he sardonically notes, "I wasn't particularly crazy about working in front of a live club audience" (35).

Radio, in fact, became his *métier* and "training ground" for what would become a lifelong career as a comedic entertainer and television personality. After graduating from Marshall with a degree in journalism in 1949, Soupy secured a position at WHTN, one of the main radio stations in Huntington. Initially writing copy for commercials, he eventually was able to do his own radio show, "called 'Wax Works,' which was a couple of hours a day...(where he would) be spinning records, telling jokes, selling time, and writing commercials" (38-9). Making the princely sum of around \$250 a week, Soupy transitioned not only into the professional world of media performer but also into married life. He blithely recounts his courtship and marriage to Barbara Fox, "an aspiring singer and model," endowed with a necessary "good sense of humor." Soupy's humor is evident when he explains that the marriage was about getting "hitched but not to a post" (39).

After his show on WHTN was cancelled in 1950, "Suppy" Supman, as he was referred to at the time, got a call from the former general manager of the Huntington radio station who now was working in television in Cincinnati. The television station, WKRC, owned by the famous Taft family, hired "Suppy." At the "station's request" he changed his name to "Soupy Hines," the last name for a local soup company and not the for the better-known Heinz variation (43). What Soupy proposed to WKRC-TV that made it to the air in late 1950 and early 1951 represented one of the first television dance programs. *Soupy's Soda Shop* ran alternatively for an hour and then half hour from 5:30-6:30 and 6:00 to 6:30 P.M. each day during the week. Writing and producing the show, Soupy played mostly his much loved Big Band numbers, interviewing the kids in between the musical selections. Soupy also did another show, called *Club Nothing*, which featured the kind of sketch comedy that would later be part of his shows in Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York City. The Cincinnati

Enquirer listed that show as running either for an hour from 10-11 P.M. or for forty-five minutes from 11:45-12:30 P.M. through March of 1951. Soupy remarks that those “comedy sketches and interviews” he did were “sort of a forerunner of the *Tonight Show*” (44).

Both shows were cancelled in the spring of 1951. Reflecting on those cancellations with some bitterness about the “used car dealer” mentality exhibited by the station managers, Soupy deploys the names of certain television personalities to critique the narrow and misguided mindset that fostered such decisions. While inaccurately identifying the connections and contexts for his critique, Soupy, nonetheless, makes some intriguing insights into the capriciousness of television programming. According to Soupy, the “flunkies” who cancelled his dance show did so because “Nobody wants to see a bunch of teenagers dance” (44). As a biting retort to this decision, Soupy cites the success of Dick Clark and *American Bandstand* happening only six months later (44-45). Although Clark and that show did attain both prominence and longevity, *American Bandstand* did not appear on the air until 1956, lasting until 1989. Another person who worked at WKRC-TV as a writer of dramas was Rod Serling, later of *Twilight Zone* fame. Soupy claims that he was fired on the same day as Rod Serling. However, according to the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Serling’s local shows went on for months after Soupy’s shows were terminated.

Fortunately for Soupy, he rebounded quickly by securing a job as a deejay at WJW, a Cleveland radio station in May of 1951. First working from 6 to 9 A.M. at what would become to be called a morning drive show, Soupy also did some afternoon programming that relied on his comedic flair for telling jokes and doing crazy skits. Soupy refers to one of his most famous colleagues at WJW who was hired in July of 1951 and whose early evening radio show came on after Soupy’s 4:30 to 5:00 P.M. time slot. Taking the moniker of “Moondog” as his WJW persona, Alan Freed would be the first “mainstream” disc jockey, meaning white dj, to play rhythm and blues (R & B) on radio. Freed would go on to coin the term “rock ‘n’ roll” although there had been references to “rocking and rolling” in so-called “race” music and records back in the 1920s up through R & B songs in the 1940s. Freed advanced the concept and the music through his radio show and the concerts he promoted. For Soupy, it was a revelation that such an increasingly popular media personality could get away with, as Soupy saw it, doing “his show drunk just about every night” (46).