

THREE ROCKS

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When Comics Were a Marketplace

When I began reading comics in the '70s, I often read the ads as avidly as the stories. Comics were a thriving catalog of oddball products back then, in contrast to the ads in current titles, which are mostly house ads and promotions for corporate partners of the publisher.

Four decades ago, before the rise of cable television and the Internet, comic publishers had a valuable audience they could sell: impressionable kids. A lot of the stuff advertised in comics couldn't find these potential customers any other way.

I thought it would be interesting to go back to one of those old comics and see how many of the companies are still around today.

Out of several dozen companies advertised in the randomly selected *Iron Man* #109 from 1978, I found four that are in business 35 years later.

Johnson Smith Co: The interior front cover of the comic was a catalog of several dozen novelty items, including the Air Car Hovercraft ("Rides on Air!"), Electronic Lie

and Love Detector ("Great for party fun, as ice breaker"), Hercules Wrist Band ("Double strap for 'He-Man' look") and the one I wanted most when I reached puberty, X-Ray Vision specs ("Amaze and embarrass everyone!").

AIR CAR HOVERCRAFT RIDES ON AIR!

New HOVERCRAFT glides like magic over floors, sidewalks. EVEN WATER! Sleek car of the future uses principle of air suspension to ride on cushion of air above most any surface. Colorful plastic, 8"x9"x2" high. 4" propeller. 48" control line from push button remote control unit. Simply press switch and this beauty rises and floats in any direction you wish. Illustrates frictionless motion principles of full size experimental vehicles already in use: Not a kit. Ready-to-run except for 2 "D" batteries (not included).

7606. Hover Craft \$4.95

X-RAY VISION

Greatest illusion of the century! Apparently see bones thru skin, see thru clothes, etc. Amaze and embarrass everyone! Regular size glasses with built-in optical illusion.

3762. XRAY Specs Only \$1.49 per Pair

Johnson Smith continues to sell products of dubious utility at www.johnsonsmith.com. The catalog seller was based in Mount Clemens, Mich., from the 1960s to 1986, when it moved to its present home in Bradenton, Fla.

The offerings have changed, but the craptastic spirit remains the same. The company has a *Things You Never Knew Existed* catalog and related website at www.thingsyouneverknew.com that sells a category of "Farting Things," several kinds of fake poop, itching powder and the game South Park Yahtzee.

Sea Monkeys: A full-page ad touts the Super Sea Monkeys, the "fastest growing Sea Monkeys of all time." For \$1.25 plus postage, you could receive a package of brine shrimp from Unicorn House in New York City.

The critters were first sold by mail-order marketer Harold von Braunhut in 1960. He died in 2003, but his Transcience Corp. in Bryans Road, Md., remains in business headed by his widow and takes mail orders. A no-frills website at www.sea-monkeys.com lists its products.

In all the years I marveled at that Sea Monkeys ad with the Joe Orlando artwork of the disturbingly humanoid family, I don't think I ever read the single line of small fine print at the bottom: "Caricatures shown; not intended to depict *Artemia salina*."

One thing I didn't know until researching this article: If you bought Sea Monkeys, you were helping white supremacists.

Braunhut was a longtime supporter of white racist causes who attended the yearly Aryan Nations Congress in Idaho, speaking at the event and in some years lighting the ceremonial burning cross.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported in 2000 that a group called the National Anti-Zionist Institute published newsletters from an editor calling himself Hendrik von Braun at the

same post office box in Bryans Road that took orders for Sea Monkeys.



The *Times* quotes vile language from one of these newsletters published in 1993:

"In the world of jewels and precious metals, only that which is pure, rare and unalloyed is of the highest value ... No one (except for Jesus Christ Himself) has ever managed to live forever. Even if you could, what a bore it would be to hang around for a few hundred years, not doing much of anything except watching the niggers make basketballs and sneakers out of Jew skins."

The news of Braunhut's racist associations caused Larami Limited, the licensor of Sea Monkeys, to end the deal in 1988. But it was picked up by Educational Insights, which continues to market them to stores today.

Larami executive Al Davis told the *Los Angeles Times* he received calls from retailers and distributors concerned that the money from Sea Monkeys might be going to racist



causes. "When I called Harold on this, he said something to me I find hard to believe to this day. 'Al,' he said. 'Hitler wasn't a bad guy. He just received bad press.'"

Comics Dealers: The *Iron Man* issue devotes three full pages to classified ads, many offering back issue comics.

There are ads from these dealers and companies: Richard Alf, Collector King, Tom Borchardt, Empire Comics, Discount Comics, Lone Star Comics, Howard Rogofsky, Max Seeley, American Comic Book Co., Jack Hunt, Pacific Comics, Robert Bell, Black Gold Comics, R. Crestohl, Superhero Comics, Ken Mieno, Comic Sales Co., Moondance, D. Belmont, Golden State Comics and Estell Comics.

I only found two of these outfits – one through Google and another I didn't have to look up.

Lone Star Comics, the chain founded by Buddy Saunders in Arlington, Texas, where I shopped often as a kid and once tried to get a job, is still a thriving business. There are several Lone Star stores across the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex and an online store at www.mycomicshop.com.

These stores do a terrific job of expanding the customer base for a comics store. They devote prominent space to an all-ages kids comics section; sell lots of games, toys and related products; and hire friendly, enthusiastic employees who defy the surly Comic Book Guy stereotype.

Jack Hunt is still around in Kenmore, N.Y., as Jack Hunt Coin Broker, a buyer of scrap gold, silver and platinum. The company's website at www.jackhunt.com makes no mention of comics.

I found an Internet message board post from 2008 that said Howard Rogofsky was still selling comics at shows and likely to be at that year's San Diego Comic Con, but couldn't find a more recent mention.

Rogofsky was interviewed in issue 18 of *Comic Book Marketplace*. He was asked about some of his most memorable deals from his start as a teen comics dealer in the 1960s.

One of the most lopsided: "He traded me *Action* #1-232. That's a heck of a run, even by today's standards. He demanded three *Lone Ranger* comic books in return because he complained *Superman* 'had too many girlfriends' and the *Lone Ranger* just had Tonto."

Mailing Comments for CA 584

With the November mailing deadline fast approaching, I'm running out of time and space. More mailing comments for *Capa Alpha* 584 will appear in the next issue.

Hurricane Heeran: Your news clippings from the '70s about Metropolis, Ill., becoming the official hometown of Superman made me curious about how that civic effort fared in subsequent decades.

Some of the early grandiose plans, including a Superman theme park for Metropolis, never materialized. But the city still holds a yearly Superman Celebration that next occurs June 12-15, 2014.

Last year's event included the actors Margot Kidder (Lois Lane), Michael Rosenbaum (Lex Luther, *Smallville*) and Alessandro Juliani (Dr. Emil Hamilton, *Smallville*); and the comics pros Ron Frenz, Art Baltazar, Chris Sprouse and Brett Breeding.

The 2013 event also included a live performance of the April 21, 1958, *Superman* TV series episode "The Perils of Superman" starring Keith Howard, a nurse from St. Louis who calls himself "the unofficial George

Reeves Superman" and has a website at www.keithhowardsuperman.com.

The decision by the town of Metropolis to pay DC \$50,000 for an official relationship with Superman must have seemed exorbitant then – that's equivalent to paying \$270,000 today, according to the Inflation Calculator at <http://westegg.com/inflation> – but it seems to have paid for itself many times over with tourism.

The original Superman statue erected in the '70s did not fare so well. Seven feet tall and made of fiberglass, it was shot multiple times by vandals who wanted to find out if Superman was bulletproof. (Spoiler alert: He wasn't.)

A new 30-foot tall bronze statue was built in 1993 with \$200,000 raised by the public through commemorative brick sales.

A Super Museum was opened the same year by collector Jim Hambrick right across the street. It has 20,000 items on display but that's only a fraction of what he owns. Hambrick told the Roadside America website that he "hopes he'll someday be able to display all 100,000 items, including the horrid original statue."

Letter writer in *Walking Dead* 110:

"Robert, have you ever let fans stroke your beard?"

Robert Kirkman:

"That will never happen."

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