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Mrs. Jane Adler

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**Soupy Sales mugs for the camera. The man on the left is Clyde Adler, the puppeteer who supplied the voices and movement for White Fang, Black Tooth, Pooke and others. Those who worked on the show say Adler was the untrumpeted genius behind the show's success.**

## The crazy days of Soupy Sales

New autobiography tells how his shows helped put Detroit TV and Channel 7 on the viewing map

**By Tim Kiska / Detroit News Television Writer**

Jim Clayton, a 52-year-old television executive, remembers Detroit summers spent playing baseball. "The bases would be loaded, it would be the bottom of the ninth, and we'd see that it was five minutes to noon," says Clayton, who grew up near Seven Mile Road and Southfield. "We'd say 'wait a minute' and we'd all go home to watch *Lunch with Soupy*. Then, we'd come back at 12:30 and finish."

Ed Golick, now a 45-year-old audio-visual specialist at Detroit's Northern High School, remembers it the same way.

"Though he never spoke my name, I knew that Soupy was talking just to me from that TV screen,"

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Golick says. "For a half an hour every day I got to hang out with my best pal, Soupy, in a place where funny people knocked on his door, a lion and a hippo played at his window, and an 8-foot dog threw cream pies. What more could an 8-year old boy want?"

So what was it like from the other side of the TV screen?

Soupy Sales, now 75 and the unchallenged king of Detroit television during the 1950s, explains just that in his newly-published autobiography, *Soupy Sez! My Life and Zany Times*.

The only way to describe Soupy's career and his autobiography: a wild ride.

Born in North Carolina and raised in West Virginia, Sales worked in Ohio radio and television before being hired in Detroit.

"Detroit turned out to be my Mecca," Sales writes, "the place where I established my career." Some 15 percent of the book, 34 out of 240 pages, is devoted to his Detroit years.

His kid-oriented show, *Lunch with Soupy*, was a nuclear fission created by the collision of a crazed comic from Ohio and a crazed Detroit television executive.

Soupy was fun and creative. John Pival, a legendary Detroit television executive, was known for his eccentric behavior and his eye for talent.

"John Pival wanted a show where I'd have lunch with the kids every day," writes Sales. "I didn't have any experience working with kids but then again, there weren't actually going to be any kids on the show, just watching it."

As any Detroit-area Baby Boomer will testify, *Lunch with Soupy*, which debuted in 1953, was that era's must-see TV. Soupy would talk with White Fang and Black Tooth -- respectively the meanest and sweetest dogs in all of "Deetroit." He'd be squirted with a water gun and get hit daily with a pie.

Writes Sales: "Within a month, the show was hot -- probably because nobody had ever done anything so ridiculous with pies and water guns before."

Having struck the motherlode, Channel 7 worked Sales hard. He had a late-night variety show at 11 p.m., *Soupy's On*. Later, *Breakfast with Soupy*, another children's show, was added to Sales' schedule.

**Words of wisdom**

A few excerpts from *Soupy Sez! My Life and Zany Times* (\$21.95, M. Evans and Company).

On why he left Detroit: "I thought it was time I move on because I didn't want to be 60, 65 and be sitting around one night having a drink and wonder if I could have made it in another market."

One of Soupy's Definitions: "Apple turnover -- a command a fruit peddler uses when training an apple."

On why he first agreed to getting a pie in the face, which turned out to be a lifelong, trademark gag: "When you're young (and desperate) you do things you wouldn't ever do when you're older. But when you're 24, you'd do just about anything -- I've got pictures to prove that -- especially if you're a comedian and there's the possibility of getting a laugh."

In total, Sales was on the air live, 11 hours each week.

Resources were slim, planning time virtually nonexistent. Freedom and a certain amount of chaos went hand in hand.

At first, nobody knew what to make of the medium of television. Only one in three homes had TV sets at the beginning of the '50s decade. The concept of a television station as an ATM machine with an antenna that reaped big money from advertisers had not yet been invented. Getting shows on and off the air without making too many mistakes in each program was the main object.

Veterans of the era remember those days as the most fun anybody would ever have.



Detroit News file photo

**Soupy's trademark: The pie in the face. He took his first pie at age 24, saying "when you're 24, you'll do just about anything."**

"We arrived at the station at 10 a.m., worked until 11:30 at night, then went to the bar and partied until dawn," says Ron David, who worked as a Channel 7 producer during the 1950s.

"Then, we'd get up and do it again. It didn't matter if you made a mistake because it was live. People expected mistakes, actually watched for them and enjoyed them. Television was so new. Everybody was mesmerized by it. It was the time of our lives."

The epicenter of fun was *Lunch With Soupy*, a madhouse in which everybody from the cameramen to Soupy participated.

David says that everyone was committed to Soupy's success, and to that of the infant medium. The director, the stage manager and the sound guy would go to Soupy's home night after night, David says, and plan the menus, plan the gags, on their own time.

"The show itself was a riot," says Jim Burgan, who worked at Channel 7 between 1951-1988, and served for four years as one of the behind-the-scenes crew on *Lunch with Soupy*.

"It seemed like everybody got into it," he says. "It was off-the-cuff most of the time. Soupy was terrific -- always there on the camera. In my opinion, Clyde-O was the workhorse of that show. It was like Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis -- they worked on each other."

Clyde-O was Clyde Adler, the untrumpeted genius behind the show, the puppeteer who performed as White Fang, Pookie, Black Tooth, Willie the Worm, and most of the other characters.

Sales dedicates the book to Adler. Sales' dedication gives Adler the credit that many people feel he has long deserved.

"Every trick behind the door knock was 90 percent Clyde Adler," Burgan says. "But, as good as he was, he never looked for the limelight."

Adler's widow, Jane Adler, says her husband ran away from fame.

"I remember when we were dating, he said, 'For goodness sake, don't tell anybody

The book also covers Sales' childhood in North Carolina and West Virginia; his career on *What's My Line*; and his stint as a radio DJ at New York's WNBC.

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what I do. They'll think you're crazy.' "

As a result, it was Sales who rode the wave of the new medium's success in Detroit. He was well paid for his work. When he arrived in Detroit in 1953, Sales' salary was \$13,000 a year and he lived in a modest duplex on Detroit's west side. By the time he left in 1959, Sales writes he was pulling in some \$200,000 annually and had an upscale home in Grosse Pointe.

Translated to the 2001 dollar, that would be like going from \$86,812 to \$1.2 million. Sales' 1950s salary made him comparatively, the highest paid personality in Detroit television history, eclipsing even Bill Bonds during the early 1990s.

Of course, Sales was an important part of the money machine for ABC, which owned Detroit's Channel 7 and stations in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco.

Channel 7 was the first ABC-owned station to become profitable, according to the autobiography of the late Leonard Goldenson, who served for decades as chairman of ABC Inc.

In the '60s, Sales left Detroit for Los Angeles to do what he did in Detroit. He was let go in 1963, a victim of a changing television industry.

Sales writes: "Essentially, what it boiled down to was that the "suits," and by that I mean the salesmen, because that's who started running the stations, were moving away from live programming and toward videotaped shows. In other words, it was a lot cheaper to buy syndicated programs, let's say something like *The Rosemary Clooney Show*, rather than produce a show like mine."

It was happening at television stations across the country. The medium would become homogenized.

Viewers in Detroit, Los Angeles, Galveston or Miami now see pretty much the same thing: Sally Jessy, Oprah and Jerry during the day, *Survivor* at night.

Channel 7's *Company*, which featured Marilyn Turner and Nikki Grandberry, was the last daily nonnews show on Detroit television. It went off the air in June 1995.

During the 1950s, though, each city had its own brand of television. Here in Detroit we had Johnny Ginger, Captain Jolly, Poopdeck Paul, Sagebrush Shorty and Lord Athol Layton.

Now, however, even though the news is local, newscasts look alike from town to town.

Such change makes *Soupy Sez* historically valuable. It documents the way television was during the early days. And Sales?

"I still miss it," he says.

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