



the reactor

by Paul Azevedo

Did Superman kill off men's hats? Before you laugh me out of court, ask yourself— When was the last time you saw a man in Pacifica wearing a regular man's hat? Superman came on the scene in 1939. Men's hats died out, starting in the '40s, accelerating in the '50s, with the job practically complete in the early '60s.

I don't refer to specialty hats, for rain or ranching, or the cute tyrolean types with feathers sticking out— or men's caps, which come and go from fashion.

I mean those good solid felt fedoras, with a crease and a brim, the kind that Jack Webb wore in "Dragnet," and the kind that appeared in "The Lineup," the old San Francisco-based TV series, where Warner Anderson and Tom Tully wouldn't have considered being out of doors without a hat, even on stakeout.

TODAY THE only TV detective I know who wears a hat is Inspector Frank Luger on "Barney Miller." He wears the hat to tell viewers he's old-fashioned, out of it, hopelessly dated.

Wojohowicz or Harris, or even the office toady, Levitt, wouldn't consider wearing a fedora, on duty or off.

So there were hat wearers on TV 20 years ago, but the cause was lost before that. In the late 50s, Smith's Clothiers in Oakland would not see a salesman who wasn't "properly attired," and that especially meant

wearing a hat. A clothing salesman "improperly" attired was considered an insult to his profession.

BUT GETTING back to Superman. Mild-mannered Clark Kent was an example of gutless, pipsqueak conformity. He was a weakling. He wore glasses. And he wore a hat. But when he transformed himself to Superman, off came the glasses, the coat— and the fedora. Can you imagine Superman, as he flew through the air, leaping tall buildings in a single bound while wearing a fedora?

Can it be mere coincidence that the five to 15-year-old comic book readers in the early '40s were the young businessmen of the '50s?

When I graduated from San Jose State in 1957, the parting advice from our professor was— "go buy a hat." I intended to do that, but I never did. I doubt that anyone else in the class did either, though we all respected the professor.

BUT I DID not buy the hat— and I don't think I will. I have survived these 23 years without one. Our marketing teacher at San Jose had told us about phenomena like the demise of the man's hat. He called it a "long term demand change," when the market for the product of a particular industry evaporates. There is nothing that can be done about it. Members of the industry will always refuse to accept it, like the manager at Smith's. Generally, by the time a trend is noticeable, it's too late to change it.

Picture a group of adult American males from above. In 1930 there would have been a sea of homburgs and fedoras.

In 1960 you would have seen a lot of bare heads, close-cropped, with smooth faces.

In 1980 you would see bare heads, a few caps, some medium hair, some long, a few pony tails and pig tails, and quite a few beards.

In 2000 what will that group look like? I can only guess that it will be like none of the above.

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