



### **Episode 903, Story 3 – Ronald McDonald Costume**

Elyse Luray: This case asks why this clown costume might have tumbled into homes across America. By the mid 1960s, McDonald's is part of a wave of fast food restaurants crowding malls and highways across the country. But entrepreneur Ray Kroc isn't satisfied: can he create the biggest fast food chain in the land, by winning the hearts and minds of the smallest consumers? Randy Liebermann from Reston, Virginia has a costume that may be from Ray Kroc's big plan for tiny customers. I'm Elyse Luray and I'm here to take a look at Randy's find.

Elyse: Wow! I love it, I love it, I love it. So, where'd you find it?

Randy Liebermann: Well, I found it several years ago at a McDonald's collector's convention. The former owner produced this newsletter.

Elyse: Nice. An old Ronald costume was found at a sale for unclaimed storage locker items. So it was basically found in a locker? Let's see what else it says. Neat. Here's all the items that came with it. The shoes, the makeup, which I love. The wig. And then it says here, "Any other details, such as who purchased the outfit and when, who used the outfit and for how long are unknown." So there's no provenance on this piece. We don't know anything about it.

Randy: No, unfortunately not.

Elyse: What exactly can I find out for you?

Randy: Is this it the first original Ronald McDonald costumes?

Elyse: Okay, so I'm going to take everything with me, is that okay?

Randy: Please do, yes.

Elyse: Okay, love the shoes. They definitely have wear, so we know they've been worn before. The suit. First of all, it's in pretty good condition. The yellow is really bright, the colors are really bright. The only fading I see is right here. My guess is that, at some point, this was red.



I've never seen this logo before, so it'll be interesting to date the logo, and these are plastic. I mean, maybe it's simply just a Halloween costume. The only reason I think maybe not, though, is because there is this label back here that says Max Weldy and I know for a fact that he was a Parisian costume maker. I've seen his work before from my days at Christie's. Not sure how that parlays into Ronald McDonald's and clowns, so that'll be interesting. And the other really nice thing I like about this costume is that it's actually complete. We have the wig. We have the gloves. We have the shoes. We even have the makeup, so to me, the fact that we have everything together is really incredible. I guess I kind of need to really find out what early McDonald's costumes looked like and start from there. Okay, listen to this. In 1966, McDonald's unveiled Ronald McDonald in his first national television campaign.

*McDonald's Commercial: Does Ronald McDonald think he can catch a fish in a washtub?*

Elyse: This is great. Okay, so this logo is clearly used in the early commercials.

*McDonald's Commercial: ... pop anything to win. Ah, that wasn't fair.*

Elyse: Ah, there's the costume. Ah, let's see.

*McDonald's Commercial: Look at Ronald's balloon. Ronald!*

Elyse: The pockets are the same.

*McDonald's Commercial: There goes Ronald in his flying hamburger.*

Elyse: The only difference I see is that the stripes on the shirt are much thicker in this commercial than they are in this costume.

*McDonald's Commercial: Look for the golden arches. Join your friends at McDonald's, the closest thing to home.*

Elyse: But I'm not seeing any mention of Max Weldy and a connection to a Ronald McDonald costume. And to complicate things, I'm also seeing a lot of references to Willard Scott, the long-



time today show weatherman, and they all claim that he was the first Ronald McDonald. So let's see what I can find from there.

McDonald's Commercial: I like to do everything boys and girls like to do.

Elyse: Alright, that Ronald is completely different than the Ronald I have here. I have no idea where that leaves our costume. Andrew F. Smith has written/edited 19 books on America's culinary past, including "Hamburger: A Global History." What do you think about the costume? First of all I'm trying to figure out if it was used in the first commercial.

Andy Smith: This is not the first Ronald McDonald costume. The first one would have been with Willard Scott, but it was a local commercial only in the Washington D.C. area.

Elyse: Can you explain that?

Andy: McDonald's was originally a local San Bernardino outfit with Maurice McDonald and Richard McDonald when they expanded to about ten different outlets. They made a contract with Ray Kroc who lived in Chicago to franchise nationally.

Elyse: Andy explains that under Kroc's management, by the mid-1960's a hundred new franchises were opening annually. McDonald's continued to streamline, automate, and format their food preparation, menus, and even architecture to unprecedented levels.

Andy: That standardization was something that was very important to McDonald's. But they didn't have any standards on advertising. And so each local franchise was responsible for its own advertising.

Elyse: Andy says a local McDonald's in Washington DC had an idea to boost business by sponsoring a children's program called "Bozo's Circus."

Andy: It was tremendously successful. You have a 30% increase in sales locally in Washington DC.



Elyse: The franchise then hired the clown, played by Willard Scott, to star in commercials as a brand new character, Ronald McDonald.

McDonald's Commercial: Watch for me on TV, we'll have lots of fun.

Elyse: Andy explains that, even on just the local level, the power of television as a new advertising medium was on full view.

Andy: Television in the 1950s and early 1960s really was a much more powerful media than it is today. There were very few channels available in most communities. So, if you had a children's program on, you had literally all the kids in a local community watching it.

Elyse: So they really were targeting kids?

Andy: The initial target was families in the suburbs. Ray Kroc would fly over a community, look where the schools were. Look where the new churches were being built. Then that's where he decided he really wanted McDonald's franchises. It's the baby boom era. You have lots of kids. There are no food outlets in the suburban area. So Ray Kroc thought, "Oh, if I get all those children in here, they'll eat a lot of hamburgers." And indeed they did.

Elyse: The advertising strategy that worked in Washington would surely work on the national stage.

Andy: The national McDonald's corporation took one look at this and said this was a tremendous success and they began to advertise Ronald McDonald nationally.

Elyse: So this was a landmark campaign.

Andy: This is the first national advertising campaign for any fast food operation. And the first time in the fast food industry recognized that children was the real market. And that's been the major target for most fast food chains ever since.

Elyse: The targeting of kids as consumers has a long history in America with examples dating back to the turn of the century. Andy points out that strategy sometimes draws criticism from



consumer protection advocates, and with increasing rates of child obesity, some critics have even lobbied to have Ronald retired.

Well you know my kids don't go to McDonald's because of Ronald McDonald, they go because of the toys.

Andy: Well it starts off with Ronald McDonald and the clown outfit. It moves from there into Playlands and then they moved to the Happy Meal that comes on in the 70's. And then they move to tie-ins with movies and toys associated with those tie-ins.

Elyse: So let's go back to our costume first in here, clearly it's not Willard Scott's costume.

Andy: It could well have been the first one that was used nationally on television. But one of the things that's obvious about it is the shirt is different.

Elyse: Andy suggests talking to an architect of McDonald's first ad campaign. Paul Schrage worked for Chicago-based D'Arcy Advertising Company, and later became McDonald's first chief marketing officer. Alright Paul. So I guess my first question to you is, do you think this could have been used in the first national campaign? I mean it's obvious that the undershirt is different, the stripes are different, but to me everything else is dead on.

Paul Schrage: Yeah, no question. It looks very much like as I remember that costume.

Elyse: Paul can't account for the different striping on the costume shirts. But he says the logo is accurate, and that Max Weldy did manufacture the first Ronald costumes

Why were you convinced that Ronald should be the national spokesperson?

Paul: We were at a very important point in our history. Well, we were two billion served and growing.

Elyse: Paul says these were heady times for the advertising business. Talented ad men and women created legendary figures from the Marlboro Man to Mr. Clean. His team redesigned the Willard Scott costume and recast Ronald with a circus performer, Michael Polakovs.



So who's Michael?

Paul: Michael is Coco the Clown from Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Elyse: Why did you go from Willard to Michael?

Paul: Michael was a professional clown. Very animated. Lot of sight gags.

Elyse: The new and improved Ronald made his debut in Macy's 1966 Thanksgiving Day Parade. That was followed by a string of national commercials, including a spot during the first Super Bowl on January 15, 1967.

Paul: We would have personal appearances. And that, you know, contributes to the entire image of that restaurant. You make it a more fun place to come to.

Elyse: On the surface, McDonald's strategy was less about advertising food, and more about promoting the idea of "fun" and "family." Winning the children's hearts and minds and then their stomachs was key.

Paul: Ronald was never designed to be a pitchman. He was a goodwill ambassador. He would be fun and over time develop trust, which was key. It's key when you're doing branding.

Elyse: Is there any advice you could give me to try to figure out if this was Michael's?

Paul: Unfortunately, you won't be able to talk to Michael. Michael is deceased. But his wife, Hazel, I'm sure she could fill in some of the blank spaces.

Elyse: Hazel Polakovs of Catlettsburg, Kentucky, met her late husband in 1960. Just a year later, the Latvian Michael Polakovs, who came from a long line of clowns, joined Ringling Brothers' Greatest Show on Earth. His Coco the Clown took top billing there for over a decade. Hazel, can you tell me a little bit more about Coco and his history? How did McDonald's find him?



Hazel Polakovs: Coco was working promotion for Ringling Bros in Chicago and he got a call from the McDonald Corporation. So he went downtown to the board meeting, and they said, "Coco, we'd like to know if you can make someone laugh within 30 seconds." And Coco has a wig that the family tradition is, the hair comes up, flips up. He did that and they roared and they said, "Okay, that's it. Pick up your check." And that's how he started.

Elyse: That's the first costume?

Hazel: Yes.

Elyse: The interesting thing is that when I was first looking at my costume and comparing it to the copy of one of the first commercials that I have, I noticed that the stripes were too thin. But yours are exactly what it looks like in the commercial. There are a lot of similarities. I mean, the pockets are really similar. And there's another similarity, the Max Weldy label.

Hazel: Coco and Max together designed the costume.

Elyse: Hazel explains how McDonald's had asked Michael to come up with a new Ronald costume, and how he had turned for help to Max Weldy, the Ringling Brothers' costume-maker at the time.

Hazel: This was the beginning, this was the idea they wanted.

Elyse: Hazel says that even after her husband stopped working for McDonald's, he never forgot the time he spent performing as Ronald.

Hazel: Coco was always very proud to be a part of this. Anytime he was promoting Ringling and he got the chance, he would promote Ronald McDonald together.

Elyse: Max Weldy died in 1983, but Hazel's kept a few records and memorabilia from the early days of Ronald. I know that yours is the first costume from the first national commercial. But they look so much alike that mine has to be something. What's the key to figuring out what it is? What Hazel shares with us next will certainly interest Randy.



I know you wanted to find out if this was the first Ronald McDonald costume, and unfortunately, it's not. I tell Randy that his costume was not used by Willard Scott in the first portrayal of Ronald McDonald.

Randy: So where is it in the pecking order?

Elyse: Well, that's a good question. Then I went and tried to figure out whether the costume was from the first national Ronald McDonald. I explain that Michael Polakovs, or Coco the Clown, took Ronald nationwide and that his widow had the original costume that he wore.

But she did have some interesting information that I think you'll be excited to learn about. So this is a purchase order from McDonald's to Michael. And it's saying, "Expense to develop a more expressive Ronald McDonald costume for our use in future TV commercial. This costume will be the master pattern for costumes to be rented or sold to our operators." Hazel tells us that her husband and Max Weldy tweaked their original Ronald McDonald prototype into a standardized costume that could be mass produced and ordered by any local McDonald's wanting their own Ronald. Randy's costume was one of the final products, sold in a ready-to-go kit along with shoes, a wig and make-up.

Hazel: You have a costume that was improved from the one that I have. So that they could send that out to all of the franchises.

Elyse: It's an important piece of memorabilia.

Hazel: Yes it is.

Elyse: So Randy, we know that your costume was part of a landmark campaign, and it really changed the way that fast food was marketed, not only in the United States, but all over the world.

Randy: Well, I'm glad to be able to own this piece of history.

Elyse: Today, Ronald McDonald speaks in 25 languages and has appeared in over 10,000 commercials. Youth marketing has become a multi-billion dollar industry, as advertising





researchers seek to measure children's wants, needs and what's known as "pester-power," the amount they nag their parents to buy that must-have product.