

Moe Howard and His Stooges

"The Most Gentle and Kind Man I Have Ever Met"

By Nick Thomas

It's been over 75 years since The Three Stooges first slapped and poked their way to Hollywood fame. Although their appeal waned dur-



Doing promotional work, the Stooges pose with the famous restaurant Big Boy. (image courtesy of Nick Thomas)

ing the windup of a career that produced almost 200 movie shorts between 1934 and 1959, a whole new generation became fans in the late 1950s when their films aired across the nation on daytime TV shows for kids. Then, with a wave of Stoogemania sweeping the nation, the boys even broke out of the movie shorts ghetto and began starring in their own feature films.

Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Laurel & Hardy were some of the more skilled practitioners of the art of film comedy. For the sheer madcap mayhem of personal injury comedy, however, The Three Stooges were in a class by themselves. In this article we will hear from the children of head Stooge, Moe Howard, in interviews originally printed in my new book,

"Raised by the Stars: Interviews with 29 Children of Hollywood Actors." In addition, we'll also hear from actors who recall working with Moe and the Stooges.

One constant throughout the long film career of the Three Stooges was Moe Howard (1897-1975) who first appeared as a Stooge-type character in *Soup to Nuts* (1930). With his brothers, Curly or Shemp Howard (or their later replacements, Joe "Joe" Besser and Joe "Curly-Joe" DeRita), as well as Stooge regular, Larry Fine, Moe would go on to appear in 190 shorts for which the Stooges are best known. Moe and Larry later teamed up with Curly-Joe for six feature films from 1959-1965. However, the original leader of the gang was vaudeville comedian Ted Healy, who dealt out the punishment to the others. When Healy departed

for a solo career, Moe inherited the role of head Stooge in 1934, and for the next three decades was the self-appointed, short-tempered boss of the team.

Off camera, Moe was nothing like his volatile on-screen character, according to those who worked with him. He was a devoted husband of almost 50 years to his wife, Helen, and loving father to children, Paul and Joan. Both have early memories of first seeing their dad perform on stage. "I can recall going to see the Stooges' early films, but I preferred the live performances which were very exciting for me," Joan Howard told me. "I have vivid memories of seeing my father on stage, when I was around eight, while he was doing live shows for vaudeville. He would sit me in the front row, and there was a lot of slapping and hit-



At Hollywood Wax Museum with wax figures of The Three Stooges. Far left is Gary Owens; far right is Joan Howard; and to her left is her son, Jeffrey Scott. (photo courtesy of Joan Howard)



Curly, Larry and Moe gang up on Nita Bieber in *Rhythm and Weep* (photo provided by Nita Bieber)

ting going on. What really stood out in my mind was that when he would slap Curly on the face, saliva would fly out of his mouth. After the show, Curly would complain: ‘Hit me harder so they can hear it in the back row!’”

Paul Howard also clearly remembers seeing the Stooges perform, even though he was only around three or four at the time. “I was in the front of the theater, sitting on my mother’s lap looking up on the stage, and a voice introduced them: ‘Ladies and gentlemen – The Three Stooges!’ Then the music began, and my father entered on one side of the stage and Curly came in from the other side with a cigar in his mouth. I don’t remember where Larry was. They began to kind of dance together. Then ‘Pow!’ – they smashed right into each other’s bellies and faces. At the same time, a big bass drum produced the sound effect as they ricocheted off each other and I noticed Curly’s cigar was just flattened against his face. To a four-year-old, it was startling to see my father do such a wacky routine in front of an audience.”

One might imagine that, while growing up, Paul and Joan had to hide hammers, household tools, and cream pies when their father and uncles gathered for family events, but that wasn’t the case. “I didn’t see

any of them behave like their screen characters around our home,” said Joan. “I like to tell people that we ate our pies, we didn’t throw them!”

In fact, Moe was a very protective father and quite a worrier. “When I started to walk, he would tape soft sponges to all the sharp furniture corners in the rooms to keep me from hitting my head if I fell,” Paul recalled. “Later, when I was about four years old and before I had learned to swim, he built a swimming pool at our house. In a corner of the shallow end he built a six-foot-by-four-foot slatted, wooden ‘crib’ which was immersed in about six inches of water. I could splash around in it, on a hot summer day, and Dad could turn his back and weed in his gardens without worrying about me drowning. He was a very sensible and cautious person in real life, not at all like his crazy, angry screen character. But he was impatient and did worry a lot. I would see him sitting at his desk at home in the early evening going

over his check book and muttering to himself. He would worry about the act and whether or not their contract with Columbia would be renewed each year. Curly and Larry didn’t have any interest in that aspect of their careers, so my dad was a worrier for all three of them.”

As a young girl, Joan says she was reluctant to tell her friends about her dad’s profession. “When I was a kid, girls didn’t really like that kind of physical comedy at all, so I was actually a little hesitant about telling my friends what my father did because I knew what their reaction would be. They would say things like, ‘Oh, it’s silly and stupid’ or ‘I don’t like that kind of comedy.’ I never lied about what my dad did, I would just be evasive.”

Her brother, however, was not so subtle. “If anybody asked me what my father did for a living, I’d say he was a meter reader for the Pacific Gas and Electric Company!” Paul admitted. “To me, that was a

normal job for a typical father. It’s hard to explain, but I guess I was just wired that way for some reason. I also worried about whether kids came over to our house to see me or to meet my famous father. So I was just insecure on that level. It lasted from when I was a little kid in elementary school until I was in my 20s when I eventually realized it was a rather non-productive attitude. Now, I celebrate my family connection to The Three Stooges. I go to fan club meetings, and take along my family films and slides and tell stories about growing up with Moe,



Ruth Godfrey (left) and Gloria Patrice with Nita Bieber (right) from *Rhythm and Weep* (photo courtesy of Nita Bieber).



Publicity shot of Moe. A long time smoker, Moe would die from lung cancer. (photo provided by Nick Thomas)



Stooges are everywhere at the Stoogeum in Ambler, Pennsylvania. (Photo provided by Gary Lassin)

Shemp, Curly, and Larry. The fans really appreciate it and I'm thrilled when I see them enjoying it."

One venue where Paul Howard has shared memories of his family is the Stoogeum, a sacred destination for devoted Stooges followers. Located in Ambler, Pennsylvania, about 20 miles north of Philadelphia, the three-floor museum features an

85-seat theater and was the brainchild of Stooges devotee and collector, Gary Lassin, and opened in 2004. "I used my own money to get it going," said Lassin, who is the current president of the 2,500 member-strong Three Stooges Fan Club and who actually married a relative of Larry's in 1981. "Only a handful of items were donated to the

museum. The other 99.99 percent were purchased by me over the past 30 years. Most of the items that I obtained from family members were purchased. The best one donated to me was a letter handwritten by Moe to his six-year-old daughter, Joan. She saved it since the mid-1930s and gave it to me a few years ago at one of our fan get-togethers."

Lassin says hardcore Stooges fans/collectors will enjoy seeing other one-of-kind personal items at the Stoogeum, including Larry's driver's license and studio ID card, which includes his thumbprints. He also has Shemp's draft card, Joe Besser's passport, as well as rare posters, toys and games amongst the thousands of items. "My favorite is Shemp's discharge from the Army," said Lassin. "It's the oldest known Stooges-related document, from 1918, and it reveals that Shemp suffered from 'nocturnal enuresis,' the medical term for bedwetting. It's signed by Shemp using his real name, Samuel Horwitz. There are only a handful of other Samuel Horwitz signatures known."

Undoubtedly, many collectors would love to add Three Stooges film props to their collections, such as the seemingly endless supply of hammers and wrenches Moe wielded to keep the others in line. But locating and identifying such items as authentic Stooges "weapons" is nearly impossible, according to Lassin. "The hammers and tools were generic props made of rubber, and not specifically made and used just for the Stooges films," he says. "There's no way to really document whether a particular rubber hammer was actually used by the Stooges. So the Stoogeum does not collect items of this nature."

As it turns out, neither of Moe's children have many movie props either. "The only thing I have is a clapper board that was used on one of the films," said Joan. "Although it's not from a film, one interesting piece I have is a weather vane of The Three Stooges made out of wrought

iron. It's a silhouette of the Stooges doing their 'stuff' and has been on my house for about 50 years. It shows my dad poking Curly and Larry, and my mother had it made for Dad back in the '30s or '40s." To this, Paul added, "I, personally, have no props. However, my dad had a fondness for collecting trinkets that conformed to a frog theme. Drawings, a magnifier, paper weights, ceramics, etc., I still have a few of these frog icons."

While the Stooges use of props to inflict violence upon each other may seem dated now, the real talent of The Three Stooges was their exquisite comic timing and athletic skills, which they transformed into a kind of slapstick ballet. This was appreciated by actress Joan Freeman, who remembers the boys brutalizing each other vividly on the set of the 1963 feature film, *The Three Stooges Go Around the World in a Daze*. After appearing in only 14 films (and many more TV appearances), Joan gave up acting in the 1990s. With her husband, Bruce Kessler who was a respected movie and TV director, the couple took to the high seas and now spend much of their time on their 64-foot long-range trawler, "The Spirit of Zopilote." In fact, Joan and Bruce were off the New Jersey coast, heading up to Maine for the summer, when I tracked them down.

"I remember when I first saw Moe slap one of the others in the face, I just started to laugh," said Joan by satellite phone. "So did Jay Sheffield, who played my boyfriend (Phileas Fogg III). We giggled so much, that we couldn't get through the scene and I actually felt embarrassed because I didn't think of it as being professional. But they were all very nice about it. The guys got along well together, and were just so good at slapstick comedy. They made it look so real and were really like stuntmen in that respect."

Joan says she is amazed that fans still contact her about the film. "I was 22 years old at the time, and now I'm 69. I still get a lot of requests to sign



Joan Freeman with Moe and Curly-Joe in *The Three Stooges Go Around the World in a Daze*. (photo provided by Nick Thomas)



Three Stooges Meet Hercules card. (photo provided by Nick Thomas)

Three Stooges photos. I actually saw a DVD of the film recently, and it brought back a lot of memories. But there were some parts I just don't even remember doing. For instance, there's a scene at the end where we get drenched with water, but I have no recollection of that at all, which seems strange. Doing slapstick like the Stooges was not my personal preference, but they were experts at it and it was still a very pleasant experience."

Not every actress has enjoyable or vivid memories of working on a Stooges film. Danish beauty Greta Thyssen came to America in the early 1950s and appeared in a few TV shows and movies. She appeared in three of the Stooges shorts between 1958 and 1959, including *Sappy Bull Fighters*, the final Three Stooges short. On two occasions, she received the standard cream pie/cake in the face, which one would expect to leave a memorable impression. However, in past interviews, Miss Thyssen has said she has virtually no recollection of her roles with The Three Stooges. She confirmed this when I spoke with her from her New York apartment.

"Yes, I was in three of those shorts. I didn't know anything about the Stooges when I started acting and

honestly, I have no stories or memories to share," she told me rather bluntly. "It's awful, I know, but it was just another job." I pressed her again: "Surely, you would recall getting hit in the face with a pie on a Three Stooges film?" After all, I thought, it could be considered a cinematic badge of honor, much like being insulted by comedian Don Rickles! No, she repeated, she had no recollection whatsoever, and promptly terminated the interview.

Tyler Chase, her friend and manager told me Thyssen's reluctance to talk about that period of her life was not surprising. "It was a bad time in Hollywood history for women, as they were often used and abused. It wasn't the kind of work she wanted to do, which was serious acting. But it's what her agent gave her and I think she felt she was just used as an object, and really doesn't have fond memories of that period. A few years later she quit at the peak of her career because she wanted to raise her daughter and be a good mother."

Thyssen also appeared with the Stooges in *Quiz Whizz* and *Pies and Guys*, both in 1958. The following year, Greta was her fetching best in *Terror Is a Man*, a rather unusual horror film loosely based on the

H.G. Wells story, "The Island of Dr. Moreau." When first released, the film began with an announcement to theater audiences that a bell would ring to warn them just before a "shocking" scene (a rather mild image of a surgical knife cutting into flesh) appeared on screen. Quite likely, the noise from the bell produced more anxiety than the scene!

Unlike Thyssen, Nita Bieber told me she thoroughly enjoyed her involvement in a Stooges film. Her

career was spent mostly as a dancer, and she appeared in several feature films throughout the 1940s and '50s including the 1946 short, *Rhythm and Weep*, which was one of the last to feature Curly. "It was the only time I worked with the Stooges, but I was under contract to Columbia and saw them on the set constantly, so I got to know them pretty well," said Nita. "They were all adorable to work with and I loved it, although Curly clearly was not well during



Joan Howard with Stooges memorabilia in her attic (photo courtesy Joan Howard)



Larry, Curly-Joe, and Moe with Joan Freeman, and Jay Sheffield in *The Three Stooges Go Around the World in a Daze*. (photo provided by Nick Thomas)



Paul Howard and daughter Jen at the Stoozeum. (Photo provided by Gary Lassin)

production.”

Nita explains that she and two other girls played sisters in *Rhythm and Weep*, and experienced a slight mishap during one of the scenes. “I held up production for a couple of hours during the dance scene because I skinned my shinbone jumping off the platform we were dancing on. And of course, everyone hit the panic button when I did that, because that’s money going out the window. But they were all sweet and understanding, and we got the bleeding stopped and continued. The other girls who played my sisters were Gloria Patrice and Ruth Godfrey.

Ruthy married Harold White, who was director Jules White’s son. I actually dated Harold before she married him! What’s interesting is that the three sisters were named Hilda, Tilda, and Wilda, and I have a real sister named Wilda! But I believe that was just strictly a coincidence.”

Nita later appeared in two films released in 1950, in which she had more dancing roles. One was a dance scene in the Hedy Lamarr film, *A Lady Without Passport*. “The scene was set in a nightclub in Havana, and I did the dance outdoors at night on Lot 2 at MGM. We did it at about

2 a.m., and it was freezing cold in my native costume. Every time we would stop, the wardrobe people would run up and put a fur coat on me; it was so cold!”

In *Summer Stock* with Gene Kelly and Judy Garland, Nita was a ballet dancer and recalls a photography issue with Garland. “They actually had to change my part in the film because they felt Judy and I photographed too much alike, and that might be confusing to the audience. So they changed my part so we wouldn’t be together. Naturally, I didn’t like that.”

After the release of those two pictures, Nita expected to see a boost in her film and dancing career; but tragedy struck the same year. “I developed polio in 1950, and the doctors said I would never walk again. They wanted to put those steel braces on my legs to help me walk, but I wouldn’t have any part of it. For a while I was in a wheel chair, but with the help of massage and exercises, I got back into shape. I formed a new dance group, The Nita Bieber Dancers, and continued to work in film, TV and on the stage. I had an agent who had faith in me and helped me get my group together.”

Today, Nita still embraces her connection with The Three Stooges. In 2007, she was part of a Three

Stooges reunion in Burbank at the Hollywood Collector’s Show where she signed autographs and reunited with Gloria Patrice, whom she had not seen since 1946. “The Stooges fan club contacted me to ask me to join them for the event,” she said. “I’ve been in show business all my life and the thing I’m most famous for is working with The Three Stooges!”

Another actress who was impressed with the Stooges’ professionalism was Nancy Kovack. I caught up with her just before she flew off to Israel, for anniversary celebrations with her husband, famed conductor Zubin Mehta. “I was terribly excited to be working with The Three Stooges and was just in awe of them,” recalled Kovack, who played Annie Oakley in the 1965 western comedy, *The Outlaws Is Coming*. “What I remember is that they were very focused, and so intent on their roles. They were not terribly funny off set. I suppose I expected them, very naively, to be somewhat like their real characters off the set, but that wasn’t true at all. In fact, they didn’t really have much communication with the other actors on the set. There wasn’t a lot of interaction or camaraderie one normally has doing a film. But that was because they needed to focus, and interact and communicate with each other all the time. If one of them had an idea to



Nita Bieber in an MGM 1948 publicity shot (photo courtesy of Nita Bieber)



Stooge art on the staircase at the Stoogeum. (Photo provided by Gary Lassin)

try, he couldn't just go off and do it like a single actor might do. They all had to know what each would be doing because they worked as one unit on the screen. So even though we didn't communicate a lot behind the scenes, I learned an important acting lesson by watching them."

Nancy went on to explain how she met her famous husband. "There was a woman who wanted to introduce us, but I refused her three times! The fourth time, she invited me to a dinner party at a restaurant in Los Angeles at the end of 1968, and she asked me to sit with her husband—his name was Vincent Minnelli! It was a dark room, lit by candlelight, and she sat the man she had been trying to get me to meet, opposite me. Well, it was all a trick, and that's how I met Zubin Mehta!"

Veteran entertainer and comedian Johnny Ginger also had a small role in *The Outlaws Is Coming*, as one of the outlaws, Billy the Kid. Johnny remembers first meeting Moe around 1940, at the age of six. "My parents were performing at the same theater as the Stooges, the old Paramount Theatre in Toledo," recalled Ginger. "I would stand in the wings, watching the Stooges perform and couldn't understand why this guy, Moe, was hitting, slapping, and eye-poking the other guys. It puzzled me, because between their shows I would see them backstage playing cards, laughing, and drinking coffee together. Moe actually took me aside one time and explained that it was just an act. He told me that a few times during filming of the mov-

ies, he accidentally did poke Curly in the eyes, rather than hitting him on the forehead, and that he felt terrible about it."

Many years later, when Johnny hosted his own kids' show called *Curtain Time Theatre* on WXYZ-TV Channel 7 Detroit from 1956 to 1967, he was looking for new ideas. "I was opposite Captain Kangaroo, and wanted to come up with programming that would grab young teenagers' attention. I had the option of using old shows with Edgar Kennedy, Charley Chase, The Little Rascals, or The Three Stooges. So I started to run the old Three Stooges shorts. The ratings were just phenomenal, and it was picked up by most of the ABC affiliates and other kids' shows around the U.S. Suddenly, The Three Stooges were hot again! I remember Moe called me from Hollywood and told me how grateful he was that there was so much renewed interest in the Stooges."

Johnny eventually invited Moe to appear on his show as a guest, and Moe was only too happy to make the trip. "The first thing he said was: 'I don't understand the Beatles—they're copying my haircut!' When I did *The Outlaws* movie later, I remember Moe would always have his hair combed back between the scenes. Then when they said, 'Moe, we're ready' he would throw his head forward, the hair would come down, and he'd get that 'I'll mirdere ya!' scowl on his face in an instant. But off camera, he was the most gentle and kind man I have

ever met. It was such great acting being able to switch his character on in a second."

Johnny recalls one incident on the set of *The Outlaws Is Coming* that illustrates Moe's real personality. "There was one scene where I had to do about a dozen takes, and

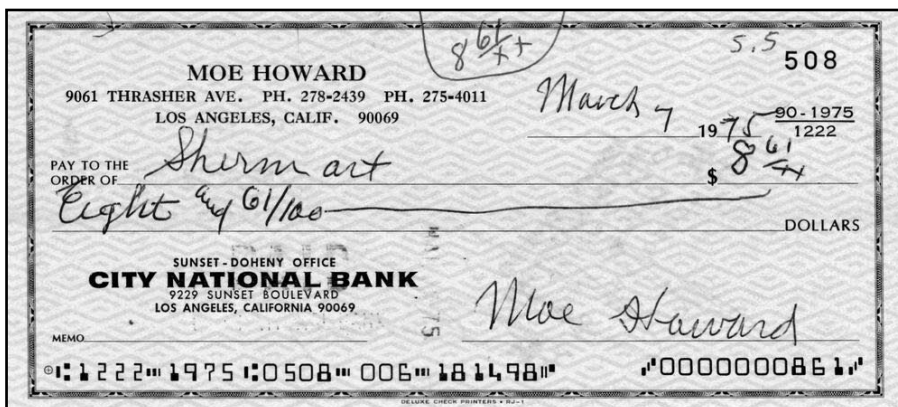
on the last one I screamed until I thought I had blown out my larynx. Moe asked how my throat was and I told him it was really sore. During a half-hour break, he left the studio, drove to a drug store, and returned with a paper bag containing a spray bottle of Chloraseptic and some throat lozenges. I remember



Greta Thyssen with Joe, Moe, and Larry in *Sappy Bull Fighters*. (photo Nick Thomas)



Moe and 12 year old Paul fool around at home while Moe's brother-in-law, a photographer in the US Navy, shot some priceless pictures in the Howard home. (Photo courtesy of Paul Howard).



A Moe check today can sell for hundreds of dollars. (provided by Nick Thomas)

sitting there thinking here was this guy who, just a few minutes earlier, had been pounding on the other guys, and then he turned around and did this kind act for me. That's what he was really like, a gentle and soft-spoken man who could switch the acting on and off in an instant—a damn good actor.”

Comparing Moe, Larry, and Curly-Joe, Johnny says Moe was the quiet one on the set. “Larry was a jokester, always pulling jokes on everyone and a fun guy to be around. Joe DeRita was delightful too, but I absolutely loved Moe. When we finished filming, Moe had everyone to his house for dinner which was quite funny. The movie had been about saving the buffalo, so guess what Moe served?—buffalo steaks!”

The success of The Three Stooges television broadcasts in the late 1950s led to the six feature films, which Moe readily credited to Johnny Ginger. “Moe told me one day, ‘You made me a millionaire!’ And when I visited his home after the movie, he showed me around the place and he said, ‘You gave me this!’ Well, I told him he did all that himself due to his talent, and that maybe I just opened the door a little.”

There were plans to do more films, after *The Outlaws Is Coming*, and Moe wanted Johnny to be involved. “The next one was going to be a pirate movie and I was to play Captain Kidd. Then, a gangster film with me as Baby Face Nelson. After that, a circus film where I would play a trapeze artist because I had worked trapeze and trampoline when I was younger, and was still very active. I thought these all sounded fabulous. But after *The Outlaws*, Larry had a stroke and everything went down the toilet. Moe called me and apologized for getting my hopes up. I just told him I was sorry for Larry and his family. Moe and I remained good friends and corresponded regularly up until his death.”

It's been more than 35 years since Moe, last of the original Stooges, passed away just four months after Larry. Their routines and antics continue to live on DVD, where all 190 shorts can be seen, and cable television (as of 2011, AMC still runs the shorts). “I still get letters almost every day from Three Stooges fans,” says Paul Howard. “I remember getting an email from a soldier who had returned from Iraq. He told me how he and his fellow troopers watched the Stooges regularly while preparing to go on missions and how their

‘make-believe mayhem’ kept the soldiers sane. So it's wonderful to know that my dad, uncles, Larry, and the others still make the world laugh, so many years after their passing.”

Editor's Note: The complete interview with Paul and Joan Howard is available in the new book, “Raised by the Stars: Interviews with 29 Children of Hollywood Actors” by Nick Thomas. This collection of personal interviews with children of Hollywood legends also includes entries on Jimmy Stewart, Rosalind Russell, Errol Flynn, Rex Harrison, Gary Cooper, Mel Blanc, Ingrid Bergman, and Forrest Tucker, as well as noted supporting actors such as Jack Gilford, Jesse White, Billy Barty, Jack Elam, and many others. Go to: www.raisedbythestars.com



Greta Thyssen with Larry, Moe and Joe in *Quiz Whizz*. (courtesy of Nick Thomas)



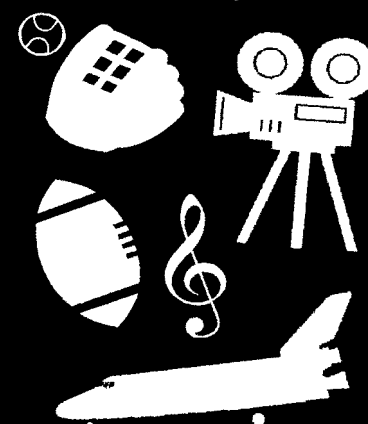
The Outlaws Is Coming. (photo provided by Nick Thomas)



Former Head Stooge Ted Healy. (photo provided by Nick Thomas)

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