

Iowa's Giant

Gypsum, along with many rocks and minerals found in Iowa, has significance beyond the walls in your home. Iowa played a role in one of the greatest hoaxes ever portrayed on the public of the United States. I am not talking about Bigfoot, or UFO's.

I am talking about a man who stood 10 feet 4 and ½ inches tall, and weighed nearly 3,000 pounds. This man traveled extensively, leaving Iowa and moving on to Chicago, IL and then further east to New York. Some may have already guessed of whom I speak, others are probably oblivious to the name. The man I speak of is known as the Cardiff Giant. I use the term man loosely, as some of you are aware, because the man was not a man at all.

This “man” originated near Fort Dodge, Iowa with the purchase of a 10,000-pound block of Gypsum by two men, George Hull from Binghamton, NY and H.B. Martin from Marshalltown, IA. The block was so large, that the procurers had to trim it down to 7,000 pounds after breaking several bridges during the arduous task of moving the block to a train in Montana, Iowa. The block was removed from the train in Chicago, where it was carted to Edward Burghardt, a German stonecutter. He worked on the gypsum, chipping and chiseling it into the form of a man, using Hull as a model. The form was created in an obscure fashion, with the right hand over the abdomen, and the left hand beneath the back. The left foot rested partially across the right, which supposedly indicated that the man was in pain at his time of death. The men used a mallet with steel pins to tap against the mineral to create the look of skin pores. The men then used a sponge filled with sand and water to remove the chisel marks, and then treated it with ink and sulfuric acid to give an aged appearance.

After the work was done, the man was crated up, and shipped to Union, NY, near Cardiff. The men then moved the crate to a farm, and under cover of darkness, they buried the man in a marshy area, and packed the earth down. A year later, that farm owner wanted a well dug behind his barn, and the workers struck an object in the ground. They tried to work it up, but found it was too large. The farm owner, Mr. Newell, directed the men to carefully unearth the object. Soon, the giant was facing upwards to the sky, and Mr. Newell stated, “I declare, some old Indian has been buried here!” This is rather intriguing because there was a well-known Onondaga Indian legend of giants roaming that area.

Soon, word spread and the locals swarmed to view the Onondaga Colossus, the “man's” first identity. The following Monday, Newell got a pump in the hole to keep the water out, and he had created a tent around the hole, and began charging people to view the occupant. One woman claimed that she could see the blue veins in the man's legs – which is one of the reasons Hull chose to use Gypsum from Iowa. In 1869, Newell had taken in \$20,000 from viewers, and restaurant and tavern patrons.

There were many visitors, including Oliver Wendell Holmes and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Some said the man was petrified, others said he was made of limestone from the area, whereas others said he was made of gypsum and not from the area. The posture

of the man convinced many that an artist could not have produced such a thing, because an artist would not have used such a posture.

James Hall, the State Geologist of New York (and previously the State Geologist of Iowa), knew that the man was in fact made of Gypsum, and figured it was a statue, but suggested that it was old, due to the grooves and channels on the back, which would take a long time for water to produce. He noted that the soil had not been disturbed in recent times, and that the form was deposited long ago.

Hull sold two-thirds interest in the Giant to a group, led by a banker named David Hannum, for the sum of \$30,000 and the man was carted off to an exhibition hall in Syracuse. P.T. Barnum sent an agent to view the monolith at the exhibition in Syracuse. The man reported that 3,000 visitors had arrived that day and paid \$1 per person to view the “Cardiff Giant”. Barnum contacted Hannum and offered \$50,000 to purchase the giant. Hannum refused.

Barnum did not want to increase his offer, and instead simply had another giant produced. Barnum labeled his giant as the “Cardiff Giant” as well, and claimed that his was the original and Hannum’s was the fake. It was this event that led to Hannum to utter the words “There’s a sucker born every minute.” in reference to Barnum’s fake giant.

People began to recall seeing Hull at Newell’s farm the year before with a large box. O.C. Marsh, a paleontologist from Yale University, examined the sculpture and determined that it was in fact a fraud, and somewhat recently created. Galusha Parsons, a lawyer from Fort Dodge, went to see the giant and wrote back to a Fort Dodge newspaper suggesting that the giant was carved from that same block that had left Fort Dodge, and several broken bridges, in its wake some two years earlier. The connection was firmly established not much later. The owners protested its authenticity until Hull, who had already made a lot of money, admitted to the hoax. However, Hannum had brought a lawsuit against Barnum for calling his giant a fake. The judge stated that Barnum could not be sued, because in fact, both giants were fakes.

The Cardiff Giant has changed hands many times over the years, bouncing all over the United States, and currently resides in the Farmers Museum in Cooperstown, NY. In 1972, a full size replica was made, and exhibited at the Fort Dodge Historical Foundation’s Old Fort.

When Hull was asked what possessed him to do such a thing, his response was that it came to him while visiting his sister in Ackley, Iowa. He and a Methodist revivalist disagreed over a passage in Genesis, “there were giants in the earth in those days.” Hull, being an atheist, had created the giant to show that people were gullible.

Not long after, Hull set about creating another petrified man. This time, it was produced of clay and had an internal skeleton as well as ape like legs and a tail. This great Colorado hoax was short lived due, once again, to O.C. Marsh’s examining the find.

Bibliography

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