

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Cardiff Giant

One Saturday morning in October, 1869, two men were digging a well on the farm of William Newell, some three-quarters of a mile from the little village of Cardiff, New York. The spot selected for this purpose was at the rear of the barn, near a swale or marsh, through which meandered a small creek. When the excavation had reached a depth of about three feet one of the workmen struck his shovel against some hard substance embedded in the loose gravel soil. Attempts to pry out the object were unavailing and the curiosity of the men was aroused. Perhaps they had visions of a buried treasure chest — that subconscious memory of the time when the pirate is the hero of the child's imagination. It took only a short time, however, for the shovels to reveal the form of a human foot, and further digging, under the personal direction of Mr. Newell, soon uncovered the whole of a gigantic human figure, composed apparently of stone.

The mud-covered diggers and the farmer, leaning on their shovels, stared curiously at the figure which lay at the bottom of what had now become a trench instead of a well. They were soon joined by members of the family and by neighbors. What was this stone giant? Some of the spectators recalled the finding of a razor in a hollow tree on the same farm some years before; perhaps, they whispered, here was the body of a man who had been murdered.

Though rural telephones and the now ubiquitous Ford cars were unknown at that time, the news of the finding of the colossus spread rapidly and people from miles around jostled each other on the slippery sides of the muddy trench to get a view of the stone giant. The figure which lay below in the mud and water was that of a man measuring some ten feet two and one-half inches in height, with shoulders three feet in breadth, and other measurements in proportion. The right arm and hand lay across the body, while the left was pressed against the back directly opposite. The lower limbs were slightly contracted as if by pain, the left foot resting partially upon the right.

There was much speculation as to the origin of the giant and some of the visitors were not slow to recognize its value as an exhibit. Offers of trade and cash were soon made, but the farmer preferred to wait until the real value of his prize could be determined.

That he was not slow to realize a good business

proposition is evident from the system of handling the crowds of sight-seers. A tent was erected over the trench where the colossus still lay on his bed of clay, and a charge of fifty cents was made for admission. This apparently did not diminish the number of visitors, for in spite of the fact that the crops were not yet harvested and an election was pending, the farmer found himself possessed of a veritable Aladdin's lamp which showered half dollars upon him. It was not long before George Hull, a relative of William Newell, appeared to claim a share in the profits and this aroused some gossip since there was no apparent reason for his participation. A sum of money amounting to twenty thousand dollars was said to have been received from the admission fees to the tent on the Newell farm. Later J. W. Wood, a professional showman, was secured to manage the exhibition.

Andrew D. White, President of Cornell University, who at the time was in Syracuse, wrote the following description of his visit to the farm:

The roads were crowded with buggies, carriages, and even omnibuses from the city, and with lumber-wagons from the farms — all laden with passengers. In about two hours we arrived at the Newell farm, and found a gathering which at first sight seemed like a county fair. In the midst was a tent, and a crowd was pressing for admission. Entering, we saw a large pit or grave, and, at the bottom of it, perhaps five feet below the surface, an enormous figure, apparently of Onondaga gray limestone. It was a

stone giant, with massive features, the whole body nude, the limbs contracted as if in agony. It had a color as if it had lain long in the earth, and over its surface were minute punctures, like pores. An especial appearance of great age was given it by deep grooves and channels in its under side, apparently worn by the water which flowed in streams through the earth and along the rock on which the figure rested. Lying in its grave, with the subdued light from the roof of the tent falling upon it, and with the limbs contorted as if in a death struggle, it produced a most weird effect. An air of great solemnity pervaded the place. Visitors hardly spoke above a whisper.

Newspaper men also visited the farm and wrote thrilling descriptions of the "Cardiff Giant" or "Onondaga Giant", as the mysterious figure came to be called. Scientists studied it and wrote learned reports of its origin and antiquity. Most of these men rejected the theory of petrification but they differed widely in their explanations of the presence of the piece of sculpture in the swamp.

John F. Boynton, a graduate of a St. Louis medical school and a lecturer on geology and mineralogy, at first believed that it was the work of the Jesuit fathers two or three hundred years before. The material he decided was Onondaga gypsum. Later he decided that the statue had probably not been buried more than three years. Another of the scientific examiners was convinced that this was a petrified body. Experienced quarrymen of the region, he declared, did not believe that a block of

gypsum of this size could be found in the vicinity. Furthermore, the position of the body was not one an artist would choose; it was rather a natural manifestation of physical pain. Dr. Amos Wescott of Syracuse, in a letter to the *Scientific American*, supported this view. There were no chisel marks upon the figure, he asserted. Besides, its evident antiquity was proof that it was not an attempt to impose upon "a gullible public".

Among those who examined the giant was James Hall, State Geologist of New York, who some years before had made the first geological survey of Iowa. He was positive that the figure was a statue carved from crystalline gypsum. In a letter written to Dr. Wescott, Mr. Hall emphasized the antiquity of the statue and called attention to the corroding or attrition of part of the under surface of the body by the action of the water. "Such a process of solution and removal of the gypsum—a mineral of slow solubility in the waters of that region—must", he declared, "have required a long period of years." In another written statement he expressed the opinion that "to all appearances, this statue lay upon the gravel when the deposition of the fine silt or soil began, upon the surface of which the forests have grown for succeeding generations."

In the meantime imagination had, as usual, outstripped science, and a number of myths and legends were developed to explain the mystery. According to one of these, an Indian squaw, who visited the

statue, declared that it was the petrified body of an Indian prophet who many centuries before had foretold the coming of the palefaces and before his death promised his followers that their descendants should see him again.

The ordinary visitors, knowing nothing of art or archeology, were usually content with the belief that this was a petrified human being. "Nothing in the world can ever make me believe that he was not once a living being", declared a woman as she looked down upon the colossus. "Why, you can see the veins in his legs."

After some time the "Cardiff Giant" was raised from his muddy tomb and transported to Albany, much to the dissatisfaction of the Syracuse business men who had profited largely by the influx of tourists. It is reported that fifty thousand sight-seers visited the Newell farm while the giant remained there.

P. T. Barnum tried to purchase the figure but a local syndicate had already secured control and his offer was refused. The new company, one of whom is said to have been the original from which the character of David Harum was drawn, paid \$30,000 for a three-fourths interest, Newell retaining one-fourth. A pamphlet, "The American Goliath", was issued to advertise the wonder, but a great deal of publicity was furnished by newspaper discussions concerning the various theories as to the origin and antiquity of the image.

The success of the exhibition led P. T. Barnum to have carved a similar figure which was likewise exhibited as the "Cardiff Giant". The owners of the original attempted to secure an injunction to prevent the display of Barnum's giant, but it was refused. The rival did not, however, at once diminish the popularity of the real giant which was taken about the country and exhibited to large crowds.

There were some, however, who were skeptical concerning the accidental discovery of the stone giant. The appearance of George Hull on the scene and his share in the profits were not sufficiently explained by his relationship to William Newell. Residents of Onondaga County began to recall that about a year before a mysterious four-horse team drawing a wagon upon the running gear of which rested a huge iron-bound box had been seen in the vicinity of Cardiff and some claimed that they recognized George Hull as the man who had been in charge.

Those interested in the stone giant explained that the box contained machinery for manufacturing tobacco products and possibly some contraband tobacco — a fact which accounted for the secrecy surrounding its movements. Dr. Amos Wescott, who was one of the owners of the giant, declared in a letter to the *Scientific American* that it was absurd to suggest that the statue which weighed slightly less than 3000 pounds had been transported on a wagon to the Newell farm, unloaded by the two

or three men in charge, and lowered to the place from which it required fifteen men to remove it even with the aid of machinery.

Andrew D. White was shown a piece of the giant and he at once saw that the material was not Onondaga limestone as he had at first supposed but some kind of gypsum. This explained the point which had puzzled him — the attrition on the under surface of the figure. Professor Marsh of Yale, a paleontologist, examined the figure and asserted that it was clearly of recent origin and “a most decided humbug”.

Thus was the reputation of the “Cardiff Giant” endangered by gossip and the opinions of scientists. Its fame, however, continued and still the curious thronged to view it. Among those from afar who visited the exhibit was Galusha Parsons, a lawyer from Fort Dodge, Iowa, who stopped over at Syracuse to see the “Petrified Giant”. He immediately wrote back to a Fort Dodge paper, “I believe it is made out of the great block of gypsum those fellows got at Fort Dodge a year ago and sent off east.”

A number of Fort Dodge citizens at once began some amateur detective work. Skeptics in New York added their testimony and gradually the tangled threads were unravelled and the story of the “Cardiff Giant” was revealed. In the summer of 1868 two men, registering at the hotel as George Hull of Binghamton, New York, and H. B. Martin of Boston, Massachusetts, arrived at Fort Dodge.

The latter, however, was a resident of Marshalltown, Iowa. They were so secretive concerning their business as to be regarded as suspicious characters, but they showed special interest in the gypsum deposits.

Finally they attempted to make a bargain with C. B. Cummins for a large block of gypsum, at least 12 x 4 x 2 feet, explaining that they wished to exhibit it in New York. They also told one of the men at the mines that they intended to take the block to Washington, D. C., as Iowa's contribution to the Lincoln monument.

Mr. Cummins refused the order, but the two men leased some land and employed a quarryman named Michael Foley to get out a block of the prescribed dimensions. This feat was finally accomplished; Foley receiving fifteen dollars for his labor. The next problem was the transportation of the mammoth block, weighing about five tons, to the railroad station. The difficulties were found to be so great that the block was reduced in size so that it weighed less than seven thousand pounds.

Its owners announced that it was to be shipped to New York, but the records of the freight office at Boone — formerly Montana — showed that it was billed to Chicago. Here a German stone-cutter carved the gigantic figure from the block, Hull himself serving as the model. Pin pricks by a leaden mallet faced with steel needles were made to serve as pores; and the whole figure was carefully treated to give it a semblance of age.

From Chicago the statue, boxed and labeled "finished marble", was shipped by an indirect route to Union, New York, addressed to George Olds. Here the mysterious four-horse team appeared and the giant, encased in an iron-bound box, began his wanderings in search of his temporary tomb. Reports from various places indicate that the route was circuitous and the answers of his guardians to questions evasive and inconsistent. Machinery, iron castings, a soldier's monument, and "Jeff Davis" were among the replies to inquisitive persons. At one place, it was said, a small boy secured an auger and attempted to do some prospecting on his own account, but the owners of the box foiled his project.

Having arrived in the vicinity of the Newell farm, the box disappeared. The story of the midnight burial of the giant must be left to the imagination. It is not difficult to picture the scene: the shadowy light of the lanterns revealing the figures of the men busy about the inert figure, the rasp of iron and the splitting of wood as the box was opened, the creak of machinery as slowly and carefully the stone figure was lowered into its waiting grave, and the water seeped up around it. The earth was filled in and the top smoothed off. Probably there was no one to repeat the burial formula but the future developments indicate that the spectators were not without a belief in the resurrection of the body they had so carefully buried.

And so the mystery of the "Cardiff Giant" was

solved. The owners made frantic efforts to refute the evidence but in vain, for in the midst of their protestations, Hull, who apparently enjoyed the joke and who had realized financially on the scheme before the gossip about the planting of the giant had been verified, made public the whole story of the swindle.

In addition to confirming the main points of the story of the wanderings of the gypsum block and the stone giant, Hull explained where he received the suggestion of the plan. While on a visit to relatives at Ackley, Iowa, he had entered upon a discussion with a Methodist revivalist and in the argument concerning the belief in Biblical stories, Hull who was himself an atheist received the inspiration of the burying and resurrection of the giant.

These revelations would seem to be sufficient to destroy all belief and curiosity in the stone giant, but in spite of them a graduate student of Yale, named Alexander McWhorter, made a study of the "Cardiff Giant". He discovered on the figure an inscription in ancient Phenician letters and evolved the theory that here was a Phenician idol. No one else was ever able to see this inscription, but McWhorter wrote an article elaborating his theory and had it published in a prominent magazine. Dr. White of the Yale Medical School also examined the figure and of the discussion between these two men, Andrew D. White says: "Dickens in his most expansive moods never conceived anything more funny

than the long, solemn discussion between the erratic Hebrew scholar and the eminent medical professor at New Haven over the 'pores' of the statue, which one of them thought 'the work of minute animals,' which the other thought 'elaborate Phenician workmanship,' which both thought exquisite, and which the maker of the statue had already confessed that he had made by rudely striking the statue with a mallet faced with needles."

But no theories could restore the popularity of the "Cardiff Giant". Some of the enterprising citizens of Fort Dodge—W. H. Wright, Dr. McNulty, and the editor of *The Iowa North West*—collected the evidence and published it in a pamphlet entitled *The Cardiff Giant Humbug*, concluding with a modest advertisement of Fort Dodge. These pamphlets were sent to New York and sold in the town in which the "Cardiff Giant" was being exhibited. The promoters made frantic efforts to stop their sale, but enough were distributed to expose the claims of the giant. Although it continued to be exhibited for some time in spite of the appearance of a rival and the story of its real origin, the returns soon diminished and the colossus was finally stranded at Fitchburg, Massachusetts, where it was held for storage charges. It was put on exhibition at the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo in 1901, but at the close of the Exposition it was returned to Fitchburg, where it was stored in an old barn.

It was felt, however, that the old giant should be

returned to its home at Fort Dodge, and it was purchased by Joseph R. Mulroney from the heirs of the estate to which it belonged and brought back to Fort Dodge, where it has been exhibited from time to time. It is now owned by Hugo Schultz of Huron, South Dakota, but it remains in charge of the Brady Transfer and Storage Company at Fort Dodge. Although in retirement, the "Cardiff Giant" was the chief guest at a "wake" given in Fort Dodge to visiting advertising men in convention there in the spring of 1921—an honor, indeed, which the old giant well deserved.

RUTH A. GALLAHER