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Robert Wadlow's Legacy in Alton, IL

Alton Museum of History and Art and the Wadlow Room

The museum is in a building that was a part of Shurtleff College, where Robert Wadlow briefly attended. When you walk in, at the table with the sign in book, there is a shoe in a glass case. It's a larger shoe than you'd normally see, but based on the size its still imaginable for it to be worn by a tall NBA player or the like. You can pretty easily assume that it belonged to Wadlow, because why else would they keep a shoe on display? But it remains just an assumption, since there is no labeling. That is until the tour guide greets you and explains that Wadlow wore that shoe when he was only 12 years old. Here, the shock factor of such astounding growth in a young boy is used to hook people in at the start of the tour. We're taken through exhibits on Elijah P. Lovejoy, the history of local railroads and steamboats, the Piasa Bird, westward exploration, Alton's role in the Underground Railroad, Abraham Lincoln, and then finally we reach the Wadlow room, the last exhibit.

Robert Wadlow has a room of the museum all to himself, and it is purportedly the largest collection of Wadlow artifacts in the world. Unsurprisingly, the exhibit that wasn't able to be curated until after the death of Addie May Wadlow, Wadlow's mother and the person most responsible for burning the majority of his possessions. After her death, Robert's younger brother Harold Jr. approached the museum and asked for their help in making and housing an exhibit where Robert would be honored and remembered as more than just the tallest man ever

recorded. Harold Jr. was highly involved with the curation of the exhibit, donating many items and helping to write much of the text in the exhibit.

Within the exhibit, there are numerous opportunities for guests to compare their own bodies to Wadlow's. At the very front of the exhibit, there is a life size model of Wadlow's head, hand, and Masonic ring. They are all positioned so that guests can easily compare their own bodies to the models. In one corner, there is a cement model of his shoe-print, so that guests can directly overlay their foot with his. There is also a scaled marking on the wall which stands to Wadlow's full height, with every recorded measurement of his height marked on it, along with some average height statistics of the general population. Two shoe-prints also accompany the scale at its base. Along the walls, there are also two silhouettes of Wadlow labelled by his age and height as he was growing, and there is a final image of Wadlow, blown up to life size to represent him at his tallest. These parts of the exhibit create a sense of otherness about Wadlow, by allowing for guests to marvel at how different he was in scale to them.

The walls are covered by a large collection of photos and captions, generally ordered chronologically. In the first collection of pictures is a photo of the house where Robert was born, and we learn that the house has been moved from its original location and preserved, since otherwise it would have been demolished to make space for a parking lot. There is nothing



inherently special about this house, and I was shocked to learn it had been preserved when so many historic Alton buildings had been

demolished for similar reasons. But because Wadlow was born there, and even considering that he only lived in this house for 2 years, the city of Alton has communicated his importance by going to such great lengths to preserve this building.



The next image that caught my eye was one that I had never seen before. Wadlow and his classmates, all around the age of 10, are dressed as adult members of a wedding party, with the caption “Tom Thumb Wedding.” I assume that this was a gag image repeatedly created by different classes at the Milton School, and it was just chance that Wadlow became a part of a scene relying upon the short stature of children to mimic adults with dwarfism. The juxtaposition between mock-dwarfism and real gigantism makes Wadlow a spectacle as he kneels in the middle, attempting to fit in with his classmates. This image, and many others, invoked feelings of pity for Wadlow in my mother and likely many other museum visitors.



This picture, taken during one of Wadlow's last public appearances before his death, is from a promotional tour for the International Shoe Company. In itself, it communicates better than any written paragraph could the amazement and wonder experienced by Wadlow's public appearances, in addition to the popularity of such an occasion. Viewers might even find themselves envious that they couldn't have seen Wadlow in real life since as my tour guide pointed out, a man in the crowd near Wadlow's truck "looks like he's having the time of his life." But more importantly, the guide shared that when he looks at Wadlow in this image, with his hand engulfing the head of the man standing next to him, he sees him as a god among men, who has showed up "just to see what the mortals are all about." Wadlow, standing on the raised

truck bed, surrounded by a sea of spectators, hand resting on the head of another person, transcends the image of an everyday person, encapsulating his otherness not only in his height but also his fame.



Signed photo of Sandy Allen, who during her life held the title of tallest woman ever recorded, with Harold Jr. in the Wadlow Room. She signed it:

“Best wishes to Bob from a TALL friend

Sandy Allen 7’7”4””

Beyond the images I mentioned, there are many more photographs of Wadlow on display, and almost all of them feature other people, who are usually playing the role of figures for scale, as shown in photo at the bottom right of the image above. These images can play conflicting rhetorical roles, communicating the otherness of Wadlow by inadvertently

emphasizing his height while also showing him doing everyday things in everyday ways, communicating the normalcy of his existence.

While talking with the guide, he shares that less than 10 years ago, the museum got a call from a group of scientists in Great Britain. They wanted a sample of Wadlow's DNA, for the purpose of studying the genetic mutation responsible for his overactive pituitary. Since there is no way for them to get a sample from Wadlow's body, they were hopeful that the museum would swab the shoes in their possession and get lucky by finding a viable sample. The museum refused, although their reasoning was that it would have been a waste of time since it was so unlikely any viable samples still existed, not because of the ethical issues. While Wadlow's height represents an extreme of extremes of hyperplasia, it's not the product of a unique mutation, but simply because he lived before there was medical treatment available to stop ones growth. A DNA sample from Wadlow is not particularly unique or intellectually interesting compared to the DNA of anyone with hyperplasia, but it is appealing to the British researchers because of the legacy surrounding the man it belongs to. This instance also stands as a testament to why Wadlow's grave was covered with concrete - if a near century after his birth scientists want access to his genetic material, it comes as no surprise that scientists of his time were vying to analyze his body post mortem.

As the tour ends, our guide offers to take a customary picture with the life size we're given a paper cut into the size and shape of Wadlow's footprint with important dates and facts from his life and map to his grave (with a slip asking us to be museum donors slipped in too). With these parting gifts is our parting message; of all the things in Alton's history, Wadlow is of the utmost importance. Take this information about him away with you, go pay respects to him,

and if you think his legacy is important make a donation to the museum. He outshines Elijah P. Lovejoy, an abolitionist who was violently challenged for exercising his right to free press by pro-slavery people, ultimately being murdered for his work. To me, and as our tour guide admits, Lovejoy is many times more important than Wadlow, fundamentally influencing US history. But Lovejoy's section of the museum is a corner with few artifacts and little written information - and there is no map to Lovejoy's gravesite provided, even though he is also buried in Alton. This disparity is because Wadlow is extremely marketable, as evidenced by his work in advertising and the continued use of his name and image in newspapers (more on this in the Shoes subsection).

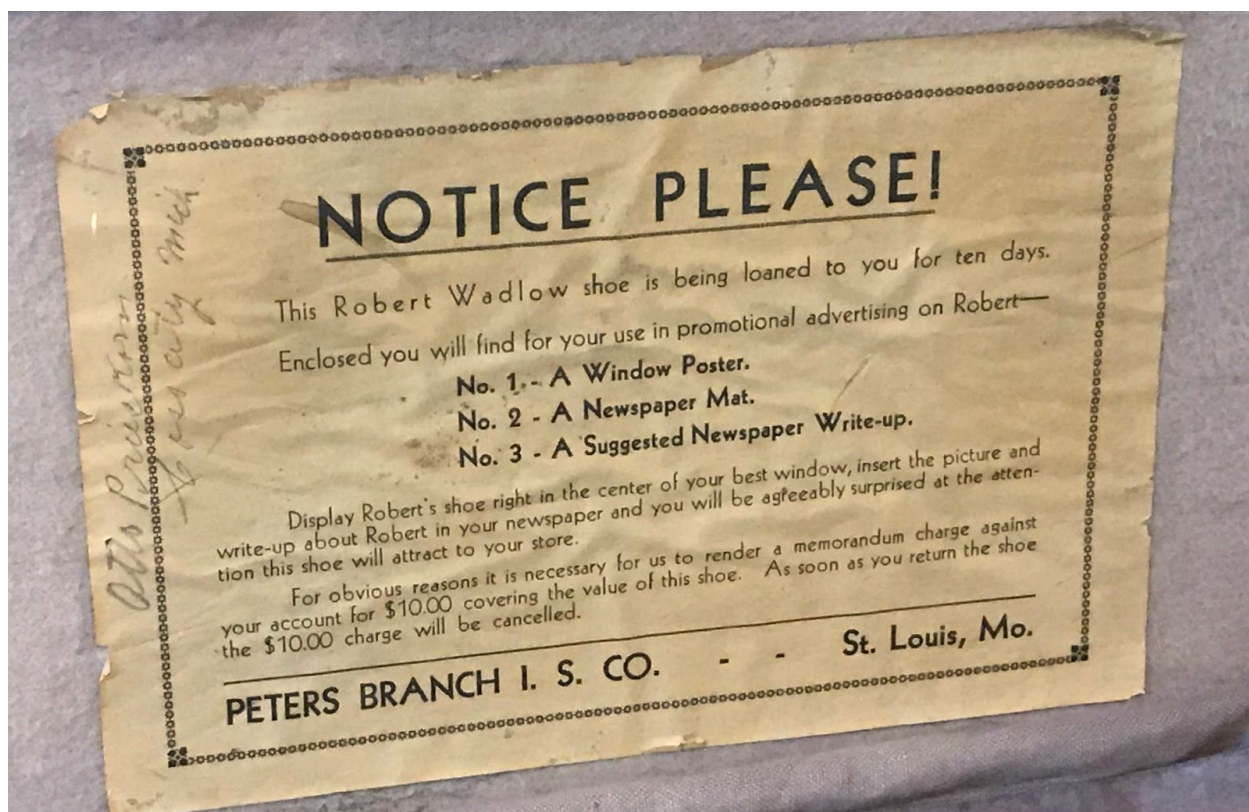
Generally, the Wadlow exhibit is in line with his brother's wishes, in that it does not focus only on Robert's height but also shares his personality, interests, and accomplishments. However, without his height, Wadlow is little more than your average person, and the exhibit cannot exist honestly without including his height and the resulting opportunities and setbacks in his life. And the reality is, while Wadlow's giantism is not what the exhibit is all about, it is certainly what gets people in the door.



Shoes

Wadlow's fame was tied to his shoes. He toured the country as the representative of the International Shoe Company, and his shoes were used as promotional objects in storefronts. One of the shoes on display in the museum

is still in its promotional tour box, with instructions on how to use the shoe attached to the inside of the lid (see below). There are lots of parallels between these instructions and how Wadlow's image is being used today. For one, the display of Wadlow's shoe at the sign-in of the museum, although while not at the front window, is intended to grab visitors' attention and encourage them to pay the fee for the full-fledged guided tour. And while not his shoe, the location of Wadlow's statue across the street from the museum is like a giant shoe placed in a shoe store window, shouting at those who pass by to stop and investigate its strange size. The newspaper article recommended by the notice remind me of the repeated occurrences of Wadlow's name in headlines, and how most of these articles have little to no new information, but instead are used to increase traffic to newspaper websites with their clickbait-esque titles.



Text: NOTICE PLEASE! This Robert Wadlow shoe is being loaned to you for ten days. Enclosed you will find for your use in promotional advertising on Robert --

No. 1 - A Window Poster. No. 2 - A Newspaper Mat. No. 3 - A Suggested Newspaper Write-up.

Display Robert's shoe right in the center of your best window, insert the picture and write-up about Robert in your newspaper and you will be agreeably surprised at the attention this shoe will attract to your store.

For obvious reasons it is necessary for us to render a memorandum charge against your account for \$10.00 covering the value of this shoe. As soon as you return the shoe the \$10.00 charge will be cancelled.

PETERS BRANCH I. S. CO. - - St. Louis, Mo.

The International Shoe company also used Wadlow's shoes and image in promotional contests, as shown by the poster on the left of the image below. The poster dates to the late 1930s, and advertises a coin guessing contest - if you guess the number of dimes that fit in one of Wadlow's shoes, you might win free shoes or a cash prize. The side by side comparison of Wadlow and his father, with Wadlow's arm outstretched over his father's head, emphasizes his great height and works to enfreak him, since his father is of average stature. Because children are expected to have similar physical traits to their parents, using his father as the size comparison furthers the image of Wadlow as an unnatural freak of nature. Furthermore, the layering of the image of the shoe over Harold Wadlow's legs makes him seem even smaller when compared to his son. He is so minimized that I almost missed seeing him the first time I saw the poster! But that is the intention, to minimize Harold to make Robert that much more fantastic. The poster at the right is from 1998, a repurposed version of the original which recreates the original contest in honor of Robert Wadlow's 80th birthday, although with different prizes. The visual rhetoric that manipulates Wadlow into a freakish giant of a man is maintained, and it still plays its attention-catching role.

ROBERT "BOY" WADLOW THE LARGEST HUMAN KNOWN TO Medical Science

Guess... How Many Dimes Robert Wadlow's Shoe Will Hold

Come in for Details

This is an actual photo of Robert and his Father who is almost 6 feet tall.

110 PRIZES
 1st PRIZE... 2 Pairs of Peters Shoes...
 Next Nine Prizes... 1 Pair Peters Shoes
 ... 100 Prizes of \$1.00 Each
 (Awarded by PETERS SHOE CO.)

The Plaza Bank of St. Louis has filled one of Robert's shoes with brand new dimes and made an accurate count of how many it holds. This figure will not be revealed to us until Oct. 10th, when contest closes.

ONE Free Guess to Everyone!
 IT'S A TEST OF SKILL! ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS GUESS... AND YOUR GUESS IS AS GOOD AS ANYBODY ELSE'S! Come in today! Get details at our store of how you, too, can compete in this contest of guessing!

ROBERT WADLOW, 8 FEET 11 INCHES TALL

ROBERT'S FATHER, MR. WADLOW, 6 FEET TALL

MEASUREMENTS OF THE TALL BOY'S SHOES
 Height - 8 1/2 inches
 Length - 18 1/2 inches
 Width of Bottom at Ball - 6 inches
 Width Around Ball - 14 1/2 inches

No Guesses After Oct. 10th! ACT NOW! DON'T WAIT!

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Liberty Bank of Alton filled the shoe and verified the count. Actual count will be revealed May 18th when contest closes. Winners will be notified by phone. **ALL PRIZES MUST BE PICKED UP MAY 25TH, FROM 2-4 PM AT LOOMIS HALL.**

Original poster on display at Alton Museum of History and Art who sponsoring this contest as part of its year long celebration of Robert Wadlow's 80th Birthday.