

Paulene Robin has fond memory of her scary, turned joyful memory first seeing the 'Gentle Giant'

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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ALTON - Paulene Robin, now 94, has a Robert Wadlow story she hasn't shared in a public forum until today, his 100th birthday.

Paulene, now a resident of Methodist Village, owned Paulene's Dress Shops in Alton Plaza and Monticello Plaza in Godfrey in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. A beautiful and

fun lady, she has the appearance of a much younger woman in both her looks and personality.

Paulene clearly recalls her meeting with the world's tallest man, Robert Wadlow in Alton. When Paulene was about 10 years old, she moved to Alton with her family. Little did she know at the time she lived three or four houses down from Robert Wadlow at his last official home on Sanford Avenue in Alton. Robert was about six years older than her and toward the end of his time at Alton High School.

"I had been in Michigan for the summer and had moved to Alton," she said. "One day, as I walked out the front door I saw a gigantic man coming up on street and thought, 'he's on stilts.' Mother hadn't said anything to me about it.

"I think I was in shock and I screamed, then turned around and went back in the house. You could imagine not knowing anything about him and seeing him walk toward you and being so tall. Mother said, 'oh, honey, I forget to tell you the boy a few houses down is named is Robert Wadlow and he is very tall.'"

The young girl calmed herself down and went back outside and smiled and Robert and introduced herself.

From that point on, he remained her friend.

Not only did she see Robert in school, but she went to the same church, Main Street Methodist in Alton.

"My cousins went to school with him," she said. "He was just a regular guy and we had so much fun with him. Robert loved to go to church. The kids would walk up over his shoe and he would never say anything to them. He was always a kind gentleman, and I had the privilege of knowing him."

Even at age 94, Robin still has a vivid memory of Robert walking slowly sideways down the steps at school. She also remembers how kind he was to others in school and others were toward him, despite his problems walking and going up and down stairs.

"He would wait and let his classmates get in classes before he would come in," she said. "I also remember him getting into his car on Sanford Avenue and how he would have to wind himself into the car. It was something to see."

Robin remembers one of Robert's shoes from Brown Shoe Company in St. Louis being in the Wadlow's window on Sanford Avenue. She can still vividly picture what that shoe looked like in the window.

Robin was shocked like the rest of Alton when Robert Wadlow died at such a young age in 1940. She was with the thousands who attended the funeral and was actually in Main Street Methodist for the funeral because of her church involvement. She went to the funeral with her mother.

“It was very sad,” she said of the funeral. “I just remember it was like we were honoring someone. Mother went to the funeral with me, but my dad was working. So many people who didn’t know him personally came to the funeral. My mother and I went to the cemetery. My mom and Robert’s mom were close neighbors.”

On Thursday, Robin said she will spend a few minutes reflecting on Robert and his 100th birthday and what could have been for him if he hadn’t had the pituitary gland problem.

“I think a lot of people will be thinking about Robert on Thursday, his birthday,” she said. “There are many of us still living who knew him and can talk about him.

“Robert was a wonderful and kind man,” Robin said. “When you got to know Robert, he wasn’t any different than anyone else. Those in Alton thought of him as Robert and didn’t think of him any different because of his size.”