

# Alton's Gentle Giant Robert Wadlow's Life From Birth To Death

by Chris Rhodes, Reporter  
January 29 2021 8:00 PM



ALTON - Alton is known for its limestone bluffs along the river north of the city, for its role preceding and during the American Civil War. It was the site of the last Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas debate in October 1858 and known for the Bald Eagles in the winter, but Alton is probably best known for the World's Tallest Man Robert Wadlow.

Robert Pershing Wadlow was born February 22, 1918, to Addie Johnson and Harold Wadlow in Alton. He was the oldest of five children. He was a normal baby and weighed 8.5 pounds.

By kindergarten, he was 5'4 and 105 pounds. He suffered from hypertrophy of the pituitary gland, causing him to produce massive amounts of human growth hormone. This condition led to Wadlow's height constantly increasing throughout his life.

During elementary school, they had to make a special desk for him because of his size. In 1936, after graduating from Alton High School, he enrolled in Shurtleff College with the intention of studying law.

In February 1936, Robert attended Shurtleff College for a semester and then took a break as he pondered what to do next. In April 1937, Robert signed a contract with Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. He traveled nationwide, receiving top billing for his incredible height. Robert's family had always been against making him a circus attraction, but financial hardship may have accounted for the difficult decision.

In 1936 Wadlow became the tallest man when he exceeded 8'4" passing the previous record holder who was an Irishman.

On July 15, 1940, at 12:40 a.m. at the age of 22, Robert Wadlow died. Robert was in Manistee, Michigan, walking in a parade prior when he irritated a blister causing a blood infection.

His brother and mom flew from St. Louis to Michigan to see him when they learned of the seriousness of his condition.

Streeper Funeral Home of Alton handled the funeral arrangements. Robert Streeper, the funeral home director, drove personally to Manistee to get Roberts's body. A specially-made casket was made for Robert by Grand Traverse Casket Co. It was 10 feet 6 inches long, 32 inches wide, and 30 inches high, fitted in a redwood case made of 2-inch material. He was 8 feet 11.1 inches and was still growing when he died. Robert's last shoe size was 44.5.

The coffin weighed 1,000 pounds and 16 pallbearers were asked to carry the casket. An estimated 33,295 people viewed his body or attended his funeral. The casket would not fit in the hearse when the funeral ended. So the casket was extended out of the hearse by 3 feet. Wadlow was buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Alton.

On October 20, 1985, a local artist named Ned Giberson created a life-size bronze statue of Wadlow at the SIUE Dental College which previously was Shurtleff College where Wadlow went to college. The residents of Alton raised more than \$50,000 for the statue.

On September 11th, 2001, Robert Wadlow's birth house which was in the 1400 block of Monroe in Alton, was moved and placed by the statue. Also, a replica of the Wadlow Chair is next to the statue.

If you are visiting the statue in Alton you can also stop by the Alton Museum of History and Art and check out more about Robert Wadlow the museum is across the street from the statue and is located at 2809 College Ave. in Alton.

