

# Explore The River Bend: The Legend of the Piasa Bird

by Dan Brannan, Content Director  
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The Piasa Bird continues to be a legend along the Mississippi River bluffs near Alton.

Alton Township Supervisor and a local historian, Don Huber, has told the Piasa Bird story to outsiders and others as much as anybody in the region.

He describes the Piasa Bird as an unverified legend that has been handed down through time in and around Alton.

“It is a great story,” he said. “I think ‘legend’ is a word that applies very well to the Piasa Bird. I receive a lot of calls about the Piasa Bird and Robert Wadlow. I also receive a lot about the Confederate Prison here and Elijah Lovejoy.”



The present Piasa Bird painting is perched on the bluffs, just outside Alton near Ardent Mills. It found its resting point at the current location in the park built in 1998. Community members even helped participate back then in the painting of the bird.

The legend dates far back before the modern times of today. The Illini Indians gave the creature its name. In their famous journey down the Mississippi River in 1673, Father Jacques Marquette with Louis Jolliet called the “Piasa” a bird-like monster. The bird was painted high on the bluffs along the river near where Alton, Illinois, is now. The Illini Indians were one of two or three tribes near Alton, Huber said.

“The Piasa” means a bird that devours men, in Illini Indian words.

The legend passed on says the Piasa Bird could carry off animals as large as full sized deer, but preferred humans. The story says the warriors attempted to kill the bird, but failed time in, time out.

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According to the legend, an Indian chief by the name of Quatoga was directed in a dream to pick 20 warriors, with a bow and poisoned arrows and hide them in a designated spot. The warriors were then to fire poisoned arrows at the bird and end its life, thus preserving the destiny of many other humans. One warrior was supposed to stand in the open view for the Piasa Bird as bait.

Quatoga offered to be the victim, the story said and as he put himself in the open he began to chant a death song. Sure enough, the Piasa Bird came down to the chief and as soon as he reached him, the warriors started to shoot arrows into the body of the bird. The bird supposedly delivered a scream that was heard well down the river and died. Quatoga left the scene and the tribe continued then in safety from the bird.

The legend says the Indians then painted the Piasa Bird on the bluffs to remember the historic event.

"There is actually some historic evidence of what this is based on," Huber said. Joliet and Marquette in 1673 documented in journals that there was a Piasa Bird painting on the bluffs.

In the 1950's, workers used explosives to remove rock from the riverside, exploding the remnants of the Piasa Bird off the bluffs.

In 1963, a replica of the Piasa Bird was again put up on the bluffs and was painted on the wall of where the quarry was until 1983. The Alton-Godfrey Rotary supported a painting on a large piece of metal plate that was bolted to rock at Norman's Landing.





In 1995, the Piasa Bird came down again because it had become a hazard with trucks turning off the highway and cars stopped with onlookers. The metal replica now fittingly stands at the end of the Southwestern High School football field. Southwestern is nicknamed the Piasa Birds. The paint eventually fades on the Piasa Bird and the versions on the bluffs have been painted and repainted multiple times over the years.

“There have been six or seven renditions of the Piasa Bird painted on the bluffs,” Huber said.

The City of Alton and the community worked together to resurrect the Piasa Bird painting on the bluffs in 1998 and created the park, now an attraction for people from everywhere to come and view.

Godfrey artist Dave Stevens painted the 48-foot long, 22-foot high Piasa Bird that now looks over the mighty Mississippi.

Norman said the Piasa Bird is a tourist attraction and should always remain in Alton.

Many people try to explain what the Piasa bird looks like and attempts to compare it to other animals and/or living things. Norman describes what he thinks of when he looks at the Piasa Bird.



“I think about a May fly scaled and the forked tail with the buggy eyes,” he said.  
“Sitting on the end of your nose, it looks like the Piasa Bird. That is the closest thing I know.”

What are your thoughts about the Piasa Bird? Tell us in the comment section below.