



Robert Wadlow - World's Tallest Man - Turns 105 Years Old, Historian Recalls Stories From Mom

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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ALTON - Today marks the 105th birthday of Alton's Gentle Giant Robert Wadlow, the world's tallest man.

Wadlow grew to 8 feet 11.1 inches tall until he died from a foot infection on July 15, 1940. Robert was born on February 22, 1918.

Robert was born on this day in 1918, to Harold Franklin and Addie May Wadlow, and was the oldest of five children.

At age one, he was already 3-foot-5 inches tall and weighed 45 pounds. By the age of 5, he was 5-foot-4 and wore clothes intended for an average 17-year-old. By the time he graduated from Alton High, he was 8-foot-4 inches tall in 1936.



Alton's Ruth Mitchell often heard experiences from her mother - Helen Edwards Mitchell about the famed Alton giant. Helen was in Robert's Alton High graduating class in January 1936. The two are both in the photo above, Robert on the far left, and Helen on the far right. Helen died in 2005, Ruth said.

"I heard about Robert all my life," Ruth, who now is one of the Alton Museum of History & Art Board members. "Mom was in his high school class and even had a locker right next to him at times in high school, so she knew him well."

One memory Ruth remembers Helen constantly telling her was how hard it was for him to transport himself from class to class in the AHS hallways.

"My mom would say if you walked down the hallway in between classes, you had to be careful," Ruth explained. "If you got too close, he swung his arms so wide, you could get clipped. You had to be careful. When he moved his body, his arms went out wide to give him momentum."

Helen also continually remarked to her daughter about Robert's difficulty getting up and down the stairs at Alton High.

"Things that many take for granted were very difficult for Robert like getting up and down stairs and getting in and out of a vehicle," she said. "There were accommodations made for him so he could function in school and in life. Even at Milton School in Alton, there is an old desk now housed at the museum that was specially made for Robert."



Ruth Mitchell said what she remembers most from her mother about Robert was he was "an awesome person."

"He was a sweet man," Ruth said. "He always tried to do things for other people. For people who were around him when he was in grade school and high school, he was just like one of them with the exception of his obvious huge size."

The Wadlow Statue, with the sculpture done by artist Dudley Giberson, was dedicated on Oct. 19-20, 1985 and it is in Upper Alton across from the Alton Museum of History & Art and the SIUE Dental School Campus. Steve Tassinari and Ron Vanata, co-chaired the Robert Wadlow Statue Drive. The Alton-Godfrey Rotary Club was heavily involved in the statue process.

Then President Ronald Reagan sent a telegram for the statue dedication that said: "I am pleased to send greetings to all those gathered for the dedication of the statue of Robert Wadlow at Southern Illinois University in Alton, Illinois. I remember the sensation that Robert caused in the late '30s. He was truly a 'Gentle Giant,' a kind and good-humored man who died tragically at a young age. I commend the organizations and individuals that have contributed to the erection of the statue commemorating him. I send you my best wishes. God bless you."

Ruth said when Robert died suddenly in 1940 it was a huge shock for her mother and his other classmates.

"It was very unexpected," she said, "So it was a shock for all those who knew him."

It was estimated that more than 27,000 people filed through Streeper Funeral Home before 10 a.m. on July 19, 1940, during his visitation. A special casket had to be handmade for Robert's body because of his length and weight. There were license plates of cars from many states at his visitation and funeral from Missouri, Texas, North Dakota, New York, and Louisiana.

The book "Boy Giant," chronicles Robert's last hours in Manistee, Mich. The book details what Robert's last words were at 10:20 p.m. on July 14, 1940: "The doctor says I won't get home for the celebration."

Robert's Growth Stats

Birth - No height record, but 8.5-pound weight.

Age 1 - No height records but 45-pound weight.

Age 5 - 5-foot-4, 105 pounds.

Age 8 - 6-foot, 169 pounds.

Age 9 - 6-foot-2, 180 pounds.

Age 10 - 6-foot-5, 210 pounds.

Age 11 - 6-foot-7, 222 pounds.

Age 12 - 6-foot-11, 241 pounds.

Age 13 - 7-foot-2, 255 pounds.

Age 14 - 7-foot-3, 301 pounds.

Age 15 - 7-foot-8, 355 pounds.

Age 16 - 7-foot 10, 374 pounds.

Age 17 - 8-foot, 315 pounds (sick).

Age 18 - 8-foot-4, 391 pounds.

Age 19 - 8-foot-5, 480 pounds.

Age 20 - 8-foot-7, 488 pounds

Age 21 - 8-foot-8, 492 pounds.

Age 22 - 8-foot-11.1, 439 pounds.