

Explore the RiverBend: Statue, museum remember Robert Wadlow, Alton's proud son

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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Robert Wadlow's height progression:

Age 5 – 5 feet 4 inches

Age 8 – 6 feet

Age 12 – 6 feet 11 inches

Age 17 – 8 feet

Age 20 – 8 feet 7 inches

Age 22 – 8 feet 11.1 inches, final height

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Steve Tassinari was like most of the other Alton boys when he was a kid; he would go to the Upper Alton Cemetery sometimes during the day and place himself next to Robert Wadlow's grave marker and imagine being that tall.

The topic of Robert's height surfaced again when his child was young and they applied a yardstick to see exactly how tall Robert was compared to them. In the end, he decided that it would be nice to have something lifelike, but permanent in Alton to remember Robert, the world's tallest man at 8 feet 11.1 inches tall.

Robert died in July 1940 at age 22 and to this day, remains the tallest man ever to walk the earth. Robert had an overactive pituitary gland that caused his uncontrollable height. Today in the modern world, that problem is corrected medically before height gets out of hand.

Many around Alton/Godfrey don't realize that it was Tassinari's original idea to build the statue and he and Ron Vanata were the two that led the effort. Alton-Godfrey Rotary and many other service clubs in the region were big contributors to the statue project.

Tassinari has always been a history buff and he sincerely loves Alton as a lifelong resident, so it was a natural fit for him to co-chair the fund-raising campaign to build the statue.

Tassinari had only a couple sincere reasons he decided to build the statue, mostly because Robert was "a good person," he said.

"The theme that carried this out was 'be the best you can be and stand tall,'" he said recently in an interview at the famed statue, which. The statue is located across from the Alton Dental School, where the old Shurtleff College was once housed and draws people from all over the world to Alton.

“In my discovery in talking to associates and friends, he was a good guy,” he said. “It is unbelievable how far the statue has been viewed by people across the world. I couldn’t have dreamed this.”

The final decision was made to locate the Wadlow Statue next to the old Shurtleff College grounds, where Robert took classes.

“I wanted the statue in a cultural environment and the Shurtleff/SIU campus provides the dignity that Robert sought throughout his life,” Tassinari said.

Before Tassinari went far with the statue project, he said he did his “due diligence.” Mostly, he wanted to find out what kind of person Robert was and he interviewed countless amounts of people who knew him, including his baby brother, Harold Wadlow Jr. He involved Harold Jr. in the entire process of the statue. Tassinari said on the day the statue was unveiled he knew that was a proud day for Harold Wadlow Jr.

Brian Combs has carried on the legacy of Wadlow at the Alton Museum to this very day. Combs agreed it is amazing how many people come through the Alton Museum doors to see the Wadlow display, which includes a high school graduation gown, a sled, one of his shoes, photos and much more.

Today, people from every U.S. state, England, Germany, Japan, Australia, Canada, the Philippines, Indonesia and Ireland have visited the statue, then recorded their names in the museum log book to see the Wadlow display in person.

“We had someone in from Germany over the last week to see the Wadlow display,” Combs said. “We have a gentlemen here from Texas today. Two weeks prior to that, we had someone from France here. People do come from all over the world to see and learn about Robert Wadlow.”

Combs describes Wadlow as probably the most iconic image of Alton as far as personalities are concerned.

“He is quite interesting and definitely a unique story for this area,” Combs said. “People love him. In my opinion, it was a combination of all the right things at the right time. Considering where medical technology was then and his disposition, it all came together to make Robert what he was.”

Tassinari was a young man when he and the others did the statue project. He said it was a “bold thing.”

In the beginning, \$10,000 in seed money was given by the Alton-Godfrey Rotary, local Optimist clubs and Junior League to start the project. Ned Giberson, a sculptor from Alton, was selected to do the statue.

Thousands of Robert Wadlow buttons were sold to raise money. Area school children helped sell the buttons and contributed.

In April 1985, Giberson finished the 9-foot statue model. The “Wadlow-fest” was set for Oct. 19-20 in Alton to mark the unveiling of the statue to the world.

President Ronald Reagan, an Illinois native, wished to attend the event but was unable due to a last minute conflict. Instead, he sent a personal letter about Robert that was read to those in attendance.

Tassinari summed Robert up the best of anyone by saying, “he was a gentleman and he had a kind heart.”

Tassinari pointed to other things written about Robert behind the statue and said, “I would have put he was a good person; that is so important to me. I would have put a sign up that said, ‘Stand tall and be the best you can be.’ He did the best he could.”

He closed by saying, “Robert was the tallest living person in civilized society, but what we remember him most for is he was a good son, good student and someone you would be proud of.”



Content Director's Note: I am Dan Brannan, the author of "Boy Giant," which chronicled Robert Wadlow's life through Harold Wadlow Jr. and others who knew him. The book contained a chapter about the Wadlow Statue and the three-year effort to build it. I think of all the service projects in the River Bend region, this one stands the tallest of all, literally and because of the amount of community effort that went into constructing it. I am proud of Steve Tassinari, who co-chaired the statue effort, and the others who worked to make this happen. It is amazing what Robert has meant to Alton in a positive way not because he was the tallest man ever to walk the face of the planet, but because he lived his life as a gentleman and gentle soul.