



75 YEARS AGO: The final hours of Robert Wadlow's life remembered

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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Robert Wadlow, the world's tallest man, died at 12:40 a.m. on July 15, 1940, exactly 75 years ago from today.

Many may not know this, but Robert's last words were said at 10:30 p.m. July 14, 1940. The last words were: "The doctor says I won't get home for the celebration."

The celebration Robert was referring to was the golden wedding anniversary on the last day of July for his grandmother and grandfather, who lived in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Before Robert got sick, the celebration was planned at Robert's parents home in Alton.

Robert desperately wanted to get home for it, but the doctor told him several times it wouldn't be possible.

Robert was only 22 years of age when he died. He stood 8 feet 11.1 inches tall and was still growing when he died.

The infection that led to his demise came from a blister on one of his feet, and it was discovered before he left Alton. At first, it wasn't of that much concern.

Robert had walked a long distance prior to the Manistee, Mich. parade and it further irritated the blister. He became very ill from the infection that ensued and had to sit in the car for several hours before the event.

Harold Wadlow Jr. and Addie Wadlow both flew from St. Louis to Michigan to see him when they learned of the seriousness of his condition. Harold Jr. said quickly after he arrived, he realized something wasn't right with his beloved brother.

"When we saw Robert in Michigan, he was very quiet," Harold Wadlow Jr. said before his death. "He had a very high temperature."

People back in his hometown of Alton were shocked when they learned Robert was sick and that he had died. At 22 years old, many of his friends had never encountered a death of someone so young.

Streeper Funeral Home in Alton handled the funeral arrangements. Robert Streeper, the funeral home director, drove personally to Manistee to get Robert's body. A specially-made casket was made for Robert by Grand Traverse Casket Co. in Traverse City, Mich. It was 10 feet 6 inches long, 32 inches wide and 30 inches high, fitted in a redwood case made of 2-inch material.

The coffin weighed 1,000 pounds, so a total of 16 pallbearers were asked to carry the casket.

On July 18, 1940, businesses in Alton stopped activity for five minutes for a moment of silence to remember Robert.

Robert Landiss was one of the DeMolays who watched Robert's casket once it arrived. He said lines to view Robert Wadlow one last time were up to three blocks long. People were there to see Robert for 24 hours over two consecutive days. Mr. Streeper remarked after the funeral, all the carpet had to be removed because it had been worn out in those two days. An estimated 33,295 people viewed his body or attended the funeral.

“It was so hard to understand why there were so many people there,” Harold Wadlow Jr. said before his death. “People didn’t have television or anything else back then. Robert was sort of like a movie star.”

The casket would not fit in the hearse when the funeral ended. So all the way to the cemetery, the casket was extended out of the hearse by 3 feet as Robert was transported to Oakwood Cemetery, his final resting place.

The Wadlow family was extremely protective of young Robert and worried someone would try to dig his body up once it was buried. The family ordered a vault and had concrete put in the ground covering the vault, so no one could ever penetrate beneath it in the night. Harold Wadlow Jr. vouched that his family did witness the concrete being poured over the vault to secure the grave forever.

Alton Museum of History & Art President Brian Combs said Wednesday and this week he was sad thinking about a young man who had his life cut “tragically short.”

“Today it is beyond routine to take care of pituitary issues,” he said. “We had two people in our seniors group this week who had pituitary problems, but they were fixed. They had a problem with an oversized ear and hands.”

Combs pointed out Robert had aspirations to be an attorney, but served as a spokesperson for Brown Shoe Co. until his death.

“He was of above average intelligence so I am sure he often thought about what he could have done,” Combs said.

“This town is blessed with several unique viewpoints in history and this one is certainly unique. I have always wondered what were his true inside thoughts and what was going through his father’s mind through all of this.”

Nancy Alexander had perhaps the best way of all to sum him up on this day: “He was an honorable, sincere and kind man,” she said. “He was always so patient with people.”

Watch Explore the RiverBend video below with Steve Tassinari and Cathy Bagby about one of Alton's great historical figures: Robert Pershing Wadlow.