

SUPER DUPER



Ty Marshal **expects**big things

from his re-creation of the

Cardiff Giant

By Andrew Johnson

Within the cold concrete walls of the factory, the Giant sleeps. His 10-foot corpse lies outstretched on the table. The head rests heavily on the hard wood, dead eyes staring up at the ceiling. A slight smirk of satisfaction tugs at the mouth. A blanket covers him from neck to toe. The air is still—it feels as though he could wake at any moment. His creator, local artist Ty Marshal, gazes upon his creature with excitement. There is a hint of reverence in his eyes.

“Scotland has the Loch Ness monster.

Lake Champlain has Champy. This is our monster, our myth. We have a giant man,” he says.

This has been the scene at the Gear Factory, 200 S. Geddes St., for the past two months, when Marshal first began production on an ambitious project: recreating the Cardiff Giant of 1869. Using a combination of chicken wire, the artificial stone material hypertufa and Portland cement, he’s created a replica to the exact dimensions of the original “discovery.” To the untrained eye, it looks carved out of a block of stone, and it weighs far less than the nearly 3,000-pound original—a mere 500 pounds, making it more mobile.

It’s an undertaking born out of a desire, as Marshal puts it, to “define a lineage to our history as a creative community.” Just as the original Giant was thought to be a remnant of millennia long passed, Marshal aims for this replica to be a portal into the cultural history of Syracuse and a reminder of a regional claim to fame. “When it first happened, it was a big deal, but for the most part it’s been forgotten,” says Robert Thompson, the director of the Bleier Center

for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University. "This is something that was in the national public imagination but it's not something we Central New Yorkers talk about."

In that case, a refresher: On Oct. 16, 1869, a 10-foot tall petrified man was dug up in a field outside a farm in Cardiff. Over the next few months, thousands of people flocked from all over the region to pay a quarter and take look at the giant. It was all a lie.



The conspiracy started when New York City businessman George Hull got into a heated argument with a Methodist minister about the validity of Genesis 6:4, which begins, "There were giants in the earth in those days..." Hull maintained that the verse was figurative, but the reverend was a biblical literalist who believed it to be a statement of fact. To expose the absurdity of the claim (and, first and foremost, to profit), Hull commissioned Edward Burkhardt in Chicago to carve a giant man out of gypsum rock. He then arranged for the sculpture to be shipped by train to Binghamton, where it was then transported to a field in Cardiff, just south of Onondaga Nation Territory on Route 11A, owned by his cousin, William "Stub" Newell.

"You can just imagine what it must have been like... How do you sneak a giant up even at nighttime through a community when the horses couldn't always pull this weight?" wonders Homer town historian Martin Sweeney. "The wagon frequently broke down. It was taking longer than it was supposed to, the men were quitting who had been hired. Replacements had to be found to help transport this freight."

The workers buried the Giant in Newell's field in November 1868 and they left it for about a year, in the hopes that the townspeople would forget about the mysterious wagon that came through one night and to allow the ground surrounding the Giant to naturally settle.

When it was finally dug up the next year, their work paid off. Citizens came from far and wide to see what was being sold as an ancient petrified man. Newell set up a tent in which the Giant was displayed and charged 25 cents admission, a price that was soon doubled. The Giant was so successful that Hull sold two-thirds ownership to a local investment syndicate headed by Homer banker and horse trader David Hannum for more than \$20,000.

Hannum moved the Giant to Syracuse, where it was in such high demand as it made its way to Hanover Square, that a new stop was added to the train schedule for additional viewing along the way. Part of the reason the Giant was so popular was the controversy it caused between religious fundamentalists and those with more skeptical attitudes.

"What developed here is similar to what later happened in the 1920s with the Scopes Monkey Trial where it's basically fundamentalism vs. atheism," Sweeney says. "Fundamentalists maintained that this was indeed a petrified man and strictly adhered to that position. The other side said no, it is definitely a hoax, and science can prove that it is."

What made matters even more confusing was that numerous scientists and intellectuals also lobbied for the Giant's validity. "People came in from Yale and other places of higher learning and argued that indeed a giant was buried in the earth and became petrified over time," Sweeney says. "They'd say, 'Can't you see the pores in the skin? And look at the veins. Clearly this was once human in origin!'" Gregg Tripoli, executive director of the Onondaga Historical Association, feels that the original Giant may have become so popular because it appealed to an attitude unique to the region. What some people considered blind belief could also be interpreted as an open-minded willingness to consider new things, even that which seems too good to be true.

"I think there was a certain mindset in Central New that did allow people to consider how it's possible to do things that aren't necessarily the way we've done them in the past. And that is at the crux of reform movements," Tripoli says. "We were a hotbed of abolitionist activity, which wasn't the predominant thought at the time, and it was the same with women's reform. Perhaps in that sense there was a slightly more sympathetic or openness to the idea this could be a possibility. We're not always tied to just what we know from the past."

Copy That

Marshal's re-creation is the latest in a long history of replicas and copies of the original Giant, which was so popular that showman P.T. Barnum offered to buy it from Hull for \$50,000, more than \$800,000 in today's dollars. When Hull refused, he commissioned his own replica, and people once again came from all over to unwittingly stare at a fake of a fake.

"Barnum was the greatest huckster and liar, the inventor of public relations," Thompson says. "He was a century ahead of his time. He recognized the

mentality that brought us Balloon Boy and Jon & Kate Plus 8. That guy had our psyches figured out before the age of 24-hour cable, the Internet and televangelism.”

The sculptor of Barnum’s replica was a German artist living in Syracuse named C.F. Otto. According to Marshal, it’s rumored Otto made multiple replicas and sent them throughout the country, selling them for anywhere from \$1,000 to \$3,000 each. “As I’ve gotten more deeply into the project and continued my research, people have compared me to P.T. Barnum and George Hull, but I like to compare myself to Otto,” Marshal says.

Unlike Otto, however, he isn’t charging an artist’s fee for his work. “Just like me, he said I’m not trying to create a hoax, I’m really just creating a replica of the Cardiff Giant.”

The original Giant is exhibited at The Farmers’ Museum in Cooperstown. Other replicas have popped up across the country, including one that was made for Cortland County’s sesquicentennial in 1958. That giant currently resides in a garage next to Homer Town Hall, but will soon be back on display to coincide with Marshal’s re-creation.

Marshal successfully raised \$3,000 for his project from members of the community over the summer through an online Kickstarter campaign. He’s constructed the Giant, and he’ll begin re-enacting its discovery and exhibition this Sunday, Oct. 16, the 142nd anniversary of the big con, by digging it up in Lipe Art Park. Events begin at 10 a.m.

“It’s a mix of sculpture, theater, performance art and installation art,” Marshal notes. “I hope people come watch and feel how this might have felt to be a Cardiff townsman who heard that William Newell was discovering something on his farm and rushed over to watch him dig it up.”

Marshal is so dedicated to accurately re-enacting the cultural scene of the time period—his office at the Gear Factory contains presidential campaign posters for Ulysses S. Grant and other historic memorabilia—that he and other event participants will be clad in 19th-century clothing.

A tent will be placed over the excavation site, just as it was on Newell’s farm.

Viewers will have the opportunity to donate 25 cents to see the Giant, and there will also be historical placards, old newspaper articles and Cardiff Giant-inspired artwork from more than a dozen local artists on display. A gift shop will sell Giant-themed products from local businesses, including coffee, wine, cookie mix, T-shirts and more. All the money raised will go to local event partners and arts organizations such as the OHA, Westside Arts Council and Lipe Art Park.

“The idea is you get the essence and the feeling in real time of giving your quarter to see the Giant,” Marshal explains. “I like to compare it to going and seeing a Broadway show. It was a very big piece of arts and entertainment, particularly for the working class in that time period. It’s a big event!” A week later, on Oct. 23, the Giant will be exhumed and transported by horse and buggy to The Atrium at City Hall Commons, 201 E. Washington St., close to where the original Giant was exhibited. It will be there through Oct. 31, after which it will be displayed at various venues throughout the region. Admission is 25 cents, then 50 cents, to mimic the original hoax, but no one will be turned away.

“Apart from just re-creating it and feeling what it might have felt like, this has real relevance today as an educational tool to highlight a great and fun and interesting part of our local history,” Tripoli says. “I think that if we approach this reenactment of the Cardiff Giant with an open mind in saying that this is something that fooled a lot of smart people, it’s a reminder for us that not everything is always as it seems.”

Other events happening in relation to the anniversary include a free screening of the 1934 Will Rogers film *David Harum*, based on the book inspired by Hannum, on Wednesday, Oct. 19, 5:30 p.m., that will be hosted by arts writer Nancy Keefe Rhodes at the OHA, 321 Montgomery St. On Oct. 22, 5:30 p.m., Onondaga County legislator Tom Buckel and Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner will read Mark Twain’s Cardiff Giant-starring tale “A Ghost Story” at Lipe Art Park on West Fayette Street near South Geddes Street.

Pay it Forward

The original Cardiff Giant caused a small economic boom in the region that continued even after it and its multiple copies were proved to be fake. People loved the idea of an unknown historical artifact. They related to the idea of a manufactured work of art with the power to deceive even more.

“The Cardiff Giant, when it was first unearthed, was and may remain the most significant piece of culture to the economy of this region,” Thompson says. “What makes it so fascinating is that even after it was revealed as a fake, people still went to see it. They wanted to see what everyone fell for. The exposure of the fact that it was a hoax was just another step in producing the legend.”

Was it an economic boom that could be repeated today? One of the things Marshal hopes to achieve with his recreation is to remind New Yorkers that arts events and spectacle can act as a tremendous boost to the economy, even if the art ultimately isn’t what it claims to be.

“I think a major portion of the economic engine of Central New York is headed toward technology, art and culture,” Marshal says. “The most minimum investment you can make in the arts has the greatest amount of output, economically speaking. When someone goes to an arts event in the city, they’re not only spending money to attend that event. They also might be going out to dinner that night, they might be paying for parking, they might be going out for drinks afterward. All this is positive economic activity.”

With the re-creation sparking new interest in the event, perhaps it’s time for Central New York to claim the Cardiff Giant as its own singular bit of cultural history. Just as Scotland’s tourism industry has thrived off of the mystery of Loch Ness, perhaps the Cardiff Giant can become an icon of the region that’s used to promote the economy.

“If you build it they will come, and if they come they will spend,” Sweeney says. “We hope this event is a success so that this can be a springboard for further collaboration in the region. I think anything of a historical nature still holds great potential for tourism.”

For Marshal, the whole affair is a small contribution to what he views as an artistic renaissance on the verge of erupting in Syracuse, a tribute to inventive thinkers and creators who have come before. "That's something this project is also focused on: Central New York as an innovative and creative region. Look what we've had in our past and look what we're doing today. Syracuse is a real shining example of the exact innovation that I'm talking about," says Marshal. "We should utilize the creative talents of artists and creative people to help forward our revitalization. It's a historic thing. It's in our blood."

For an event calendar and more information about the project, visit www.syracusecardiffgiant.com.