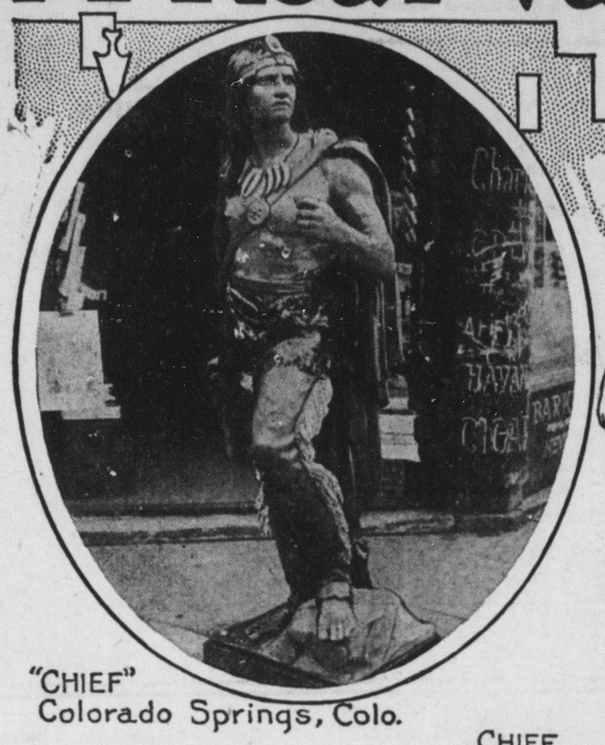
A Real Vanishing American



"CHIEF"
Colorado Springs, Colo.

CHIEF
SEMLOH,
San Francisco

'BLACK HAWK," Galena, Ill.

The Last Cigar Store Indian

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

SPEAK of the "Vanishing American" and at once you think of "Lo, the Poor Indian." While it is true that the number of Indians in the United States has greatly decreased since the caravels of Columbus first touched the shores of the New World, yet the presence of nearly a quarter of a million red men within our borders is testimony to the fact that poor Lo has far from reached the vanishing point.

But there is another type of Indian that is truly a "Vanishing American." He is the cigar store Indian, the sign, symbol and guardian angel of the cigar store. There was a time when no tobacco shop was complete without the figure of a stalwart brave or a plump Indian princess standing in front of it. But today, with but few exceptions, you will have to go to a museum or an antique shop to find such an aboriginal symbol of trade in one of the earliest American commodities. And, if by chance, you wish to own one, you'd better be prepared to pay from $200 up for it. For the cigar store Indian is now "Americana" and his value is in inverse ratio to his scarcity.

It is one of the paradoxes of history that this "Vanishing American" was not of American origin at all. Tobacco was introduced to the Old World by a Spanish physician in 1558 and in 1586 Sir Francis Drake brought the equipment for smoking to Sir Walter Raleigh who made the habit fashionable in England. When England was Merrie England under James I (1603-1625) there were wooden Indian trade signs in that country. When Pocahontas died, in 1617, the wooden Indian was no strange sight.

But the early Indians seen in Europe were fanciful figures, made by carvers who had not seen American Indians. As one writer has observed:

"Early Indians showed that Europe had settled down to the belief that American Indians wore no clothes except a kilt of tobacco leaves—a wonderful triad of utility when one thinks of it—at once nether apparel, currency and the makin's, to be drawn upon up to the limit of decency. London types resembled negroes, and for 200 years were known as 'black boys.'"

While the Indian figure as a trade sign started in England, it reached grandeur and true character in the United States. American sculptors knew the Indian, his features and characteristics, and the resulting figures were astounding. Four groups of designs for wooden tobacco trade sign figures developed in the United States—chiefs, squaws, Roman figures and white men. The last named included such figures as Uncle Sam, Walter Raleigh, policemen, "forty-niners" and smoking girls.

A plump Pocahontas—the squaw type—was seen in Boston as early as 1730. In 1770, when Christopher Demuth opened a little tobacco shop at Lancaster, Pa., a dainty wooden gentleman offered a snuff box instead of the traditional cigars. Baltimore claims to have had cigar store fixtures before 1770.

But it was not until shortly before the Civil war that hordes of this race of red men appeared on the American scene. According to one chronicler the wooden Indian was first introduced to his job as guardian angel of cigar stores by a man named Chichester, about 1850. The sculptor of these earliest specimens was Tom Millard. In the first days of the fad some of the more aristocratic chiefs were made of metal cast in molds. This type, however, was soon abandoned; even from the first most of the figures were of wood. These were all made by hand, generally of white pine, and considerable skill was required in their shaping. Logs were first blocked out with an ax for the body, after which the arms were attached and the features marked out with a chisel. Finer carving tools gave the finishing touches. They were then painted and mounted on wheels for delivery.

The original sculptors were carvers of ship's figure heads. With the decay of American shipping, carvers here, finding their occupation slipping away from them, made the wooden Indian more than a part-time job. They turned to him as their mainstay. One of these carvers, perhaps the most famous of them all, was Louis Jobin of Ste. Anne de Beaupre in Quebec.

When Jobin died there a few years ago at the age of eighty-six he was given wide publicity as "the originator of the cigar-store Indian," although it is doubtful if that characterization can justly be applied to any one man. But his pre-eminence in this field is indicated by the following excerpts from his obituary notices in the newspapers at the time of his death:

"Louis Jobin's family name does not rest exclusively on his bizarre production. He was described as the greatest wood carver in the world. He carved wood for seventy years, though of late his sight had failed and he had laid away his chisel.

"While cigar store Indians are becoming extinct, those created by Jobin in his early days in the industry are in deep demand by collectors. One of the masterpieces of St. Nicotine stands today at the front door of a tobacconist's shop on the Rue St. Jean, in Quebec city, where it was placed fifty years ago. The owner has refused $500 for it.

"Jobin was a humble artist, who never talked of art for art's sake, but did whatever his hand found to do. What was in demand sixty and seventy years ago was figureheads for ships. Canada was a center of the wooden shipbuilding industry. So the young Jobin, although he went for a brief period to New York, found more ample scope for his talents at home.

"'Forty years I carved for ships,' Jobin said. 'Then the steamers came in and iron had no use for wood. I had long carved Indians. I also carved the figure of a notary for a notary's door in Montreal. But for years I have done mostly angels and apostles and saints.'

"Jobin's art will not altogether die with him. He leaves behind him a nephew, Edouard Marcotte, trained in his craft, and Ste. Anne, though the great master of wood carving is no more, will not be deprived of sacred iconography."

While some dealers "commissioned" home talent carvers to "execute" their Indians, the wide demand gave birth to a new trade. Research has failed to disclose any evidence of a factory for making wooden Indians, but the braves were carried as a line by the "drummers" for wholesale tobacco houses and pictures of Indians graced their catalogues.

Edward Hen, one of the leaders in the tobacco business in the East, found profit in the propagation of the new Indian race and advertised the braves for sale as early as 1850. In 1871 Hen assembled in an old five-story building in New York city a congress of wooden Indians, certainly a fearful sight. Hundreds of red men, squaws and white figures, all freshly and daringly painted, lined the walls.

Twenty-five dollars was the average price for the commonest variety of wooden Indian—often braves which had been traded for other figures, and repainted. But what a difference time has made in the cigar store Indian market! It might be possible to buy one for $25 in these depressed times, but it's very doubtful.

Several years ago the Cleveland Plain Dealer conducted a "wooden Indian contest," which brought to light a number of these interesting relics and as a result one of them, "Seneca John," alias "The Tiffin Tecumseh," achieved a lasting place in the annals of American antiquities when he was sold by Albinus Elehert, a farmer living near New Riegel, Ohio, for $100 to Henry Ford, who has given the redskin a permanent home in his museum of American antiques at Dearborn, Mich. Mr. Ford had had a "squaw" for some time, but desiring a mate for her, he instituted a search for one which resulted in his acquiring "Seneca John."

A year or so ago Mark Sullivan, writing in the New York Herald Tribune on the many signs of a rapidly changing America, said "Another news item that makes vivid the quick passing of recently familiar features of American life is this in the New York Herald Tribune:

"'Penn Yan, N. Y.—One of the last members of a vanishing tribe of wooden Indians has been purchased for $100 by an antique dealer here. A year ago the hand-carved Indian was sold by a Montour Falls tobacconist for $10.'

"A 1,000 per cent increase in value within a year suggests extreme rapidity in the process of antiquation. So quickly does change come in America that before one knows it, an institution or a familiar detail of the surface of life becomes antique."

As a matter of fact it would seem that both Mr. Ford and the antique dealer in Penn Yan, N. Y., got real bargains when they paid only $100 for their wooden Indians. For M. L. Blumenthal, writing in the Saturday Evening Post only a short time ago, reported finding "a much-battered wooden Indian of the sort without which no cigar store was considered au fait or even de rigueur twenty-five years ago" in a junk shop and the dealer asked $350 for it, declaring that the price was "not out of the way at all. It's a male Indian—squaws are cheaper—and it's a good example of early American carving."

But his statement that squaws are cheaper is not borne out by the following item which appeared soon afterwards in the Paris (Mo.) Mercury: "It is not generally known, but cigar Indians, formerly the outdoor sign of cigar stores, have become valuable antiques, and good specimens bring as high as $500. A firm of dealers has been negotiating with the Paris Cigar company for the very plump and handsome squaw th has graced Main street, Paris, now for more than forty years, but Frank Jones, owner and manager, is a man of sentiment, and has, it is said, turned down an offer of $300 for her. 'You see,' he said, 'she's been here so long and never knocked about either the conversation or the weather, never so much as taken a trip, or changed the cut of her clothes, that it would be cruel to uproot her and sell her either down the river or up. I have known her since a small boy, and am downright attached to her. Some things mean more than money. My squaw is not for sale. She knows too much about Paris, past and present, to risk out of sight, and in addition I know of no other man who can boast of that rarest of all earthly blessings, a wooden squaw who cannot talk. You have no idea how satisfactory she is at times.'"

Consider also the case of "Chief," who stands in front of a cigar store in Colorado Springs, Colo. Frank and Clinton Osborn, proprietors of the store, say that they have had frequent offers ranging all the way from $500 up to $1,000 for this 600-pound metal warrior whom they obtained at an auction sale of unclaimed goods in a storage warehouse in that city some 20 years ago. But they have steadfastly refused all offers for "Chief."

Like the Osborns there are other owners of cigar store Indians who won't part with their prizes for any price. There's Bob Parsons, pioneer tobacco dealer at Ashland, Wis., whose store still is guarded, after 40 years, by fierce-eyed Chief Sitting Bull. Parsons is intensely proud of his Indian. Thousands of tourists have visited his store to view the brave. Indians, too, come sometimes, but reverently.

"Sitting Bull is an exact model of the great chief who ruled the Dakota plains when white men first pushed beyond the Mississippi river," says Parsons. "He was carved for me by hand from white pine by Herman Kruske, a woodworker at Ashland, half a century ago."

Sitting Bull, a tall, bright yellow figure, dominates the drab street that is his tribal domain. The black, braided hair, that holds a single upright feather, falls over the shoulders of his fringed buckskin coat. His left hand grips his tomahawk; his right supports the end of a huge cigar. He is the glorified realization of memories of cigar store Indians.

Each morning Sitting Bull is rolled to his position before Parson's shop, which clings to traditions of the past and sells tobacco only. Each night he's rolled back into his tepee to keep a vigil over the darkened shop.

Parsons has refused several offers for Sitting Bull and declares he'll never sell him. He hopes that when he's gone, the old chief will be cared for by the Chequamegon Bay Old Settlers' association.

Chief Semloh, California's oldest Indian and a veteran of the gold rush, stands before the shop of S. E. Holmes in San Francisco. This wooden brave was shipped around Cape Horn on a sailing vessel in 1850 from New York, consigned to a pioneer tobacconist in Marysville, Calif. Marysville, 140 miles from San Francisco, then was thronged with prospectors. Chief Semloh did duty for 60 years in this town.

Ten years ago, new owners irreverently committed Chief Semloh to the basement. Resurrected by his present owner, the old chief underwent surgery a year ago and now is perhaps the most modern Indian in the United States. At a cost of several hundred dollars, Chief Semloh was equipped with a speaking voice and the faculty of smoking cigars. Now he puffs away and gives advice to smokers as he keeps guard before Holmes' shop.

An eighty-two-year vigil before the door of the Maltzberger cigar store, in Reading, Pa., ended in 1929 for Old Eagle Eye, a blue-eyed wooden Indian cut from a solid block of wood by a New York carver. He was purchased by cigar store proprietors of the city and placed in the Reading museum.

NO TOOL COMPARES WITH HUMAN HAND

Well Designated as "Master Instrument."

The French are so continually criticizing us for our subserviency to the machine that it is interesting to find a Frenchman who takes a somewhat different point of view.

Monsieur Dubreuil is a working man himself, who has spent his life operating machines, and who is enthusiastic over their labor-saving qualities. Yet he finds that in the last analysis the human hand is the master instrument, and will always remain so. He illustrates the point by describing some operations which he witnessed at an automobile factory.

Some stamping dies weighing two or three tons are here first shaped by machine tools. But when at last the die is almost completed by mechanical means, it is given to workers who finish it by hand, first using small electric grinders, and then finer files.

The die is submitted to finer and finer measuring, the worker holding his breath in the intensity of his concentration on the perfection of the curve. When every possible instrument has been used for the attainment of this perfection, "I saw," he says, "one of the most extraordinary performances encountered during my stay in American factories.

"When all the resources of the most delicate measuring instruments had been exhausted, they were put aside as useless in the achievement of ultimate perfection in the die. The worker alone with his hands and the finest files was left to finish the piece—or, as it may aptly be said, to give it the final touch.

"With his right hand wide open and fingers spread, he caresses for a long time the delicate curves predetermined by the calipers, and to the sensitive touch of his fingers are revealed minute humps imperceptible to the calipers.

"Whenever he feels any irregularity in the curve, he gives a few light touches with the file until his hand feels only the harmonious continuity of the curves the die is to reproduce in the sheet iron to be stamped.

"Thus I saw with emotion that in spite of the instruments invented by modern mechanical ingenuity, the human hand had still the last word, belying all the somber predictions recklessly made on the disappearance of the traditional trades and the gradual transformation of the entire working class into automatons."

Monetary Truth

Money talks, but not as loud as lack of it.