

XYLANTHROPOLOGY

# Wooden Indians

## The Old Cigar Store Emblem Stages a Comeback; Now Valued as Folk Art and Studied by Scientists

By EMILY C. DAVIS

**T**HERE'S a new science coming to the fore. You might call it in plain English the Science of Wooden Man. And then again, you might coin a nice, scientific-sounding Greek name for it. Like this:

Xylon is Greek for wood.

Anthropology is Greek for the science of man.

So, Xylanthropology would be the Science of Wooden Man. Say it a few times and it reels right off your tongue.

The study of Wooden Man in America naturally takes in wooden Indians; and wooden white men, too—but we'll come to them later.

Americans who can recall life before the jazz age may admit remembering the wooden Indian era of our history. In those days, they can tell you, wooden Indians stood around quite ignored by science. They were just familiar figures on Main Street.

Almost every cigar store that could afford it had a silent Injun Chief or an Indian Maid—Pocahontas, of course—outside the shop door to welcome in the customers. Pocahontas with a bunch of wooden cigars in her hand was the first cigarette girl.

Those Indians held doorman jobs for about 200 years, and had their widest employment around 1850 to 1880. Then came the Wooden Indian depression era. Fewer and fewer were seen.

### New Dignity

But now, the wooden Indians have staged a comeback in the public eye, with a new kind of dignity. They are hailed as interesting historic objects from an earlier American era. They are even classed as art antiquities. Collectors and museum curators treat them with care, and any time you meet one of these Indians out taking sun and rain in the face in front of a store these days, when you tour America, you can write home about it. That sight is rare.

Efforts to salvage the history of these figures, and their significance, are being made. The wooden dumbness of a cigar store Indian used to be a great target for jokes. Now, it is something

to sigh over, that these painted redskins can't tell their experiences.

The Works Progress Administration is one group that is gathering xylanthropological data. As American folk art, cigar store Indians are included in the Index of American Design which the WPA is busily compiling. For years, Americans laughed at the wooden Indian school of art. Now, it turns out that many of these quaint carvings are not so bad, after all. Looked upon as folk art, they rate as "works made in this country of good and significant design."

The index will provide for the first time a panorama of American design in a big portfolio illustrated with 7,000 plates. It shows decorative designs found on American toys and textiles, old Southwestern spurs and old Philadelphia highboys, Sandwich glass from Cape Cod, figureheads carved for sailing ships—and cigar store Indians in all their finery of tobacco-leaf skirts and fancy feathers.

### Valued Abroad

Foreign nations, it seems, have long realized the value of such compilations. They are useful as source material, not only to artists and designers but to historians and other research workers who need data on a country's art and craft traditions. So America is to have its index of art—wooden Indians and all.

In a quest for Indians worthy to illustrate our good folk art, the WPA artists have struck their best hunting ground in Grand Rapids, Michigan. There, Dudley A. Waters owns a collection of 41 figures, rated as the biggest and most famous gathering of wooden Indians in America.

"Wooden Indians" describes the collection briefly, for want of a better short name. But not all the statues are Indians, and not all are wooden.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, some cigar store figures were cast in metal. And then, too, there were some tobacconists who wanted to be different, and so they ordered some other kind of wooden figure, not an Indian, carved for a sign.

These novelty seekers would order a



INDIANS CARVED, TOO

*White men carved wooden Indians, and Indians carved wooden white men. In Panama, Indian doctors still use canes bearing the portrait of Dr. William Patterson, because they think the old Scottish doctor will help them cure the sick. The two canes shown here are in the U. S. National Museum.*

long-bearded wooden Turk, or a Sir Walter Raleigh, or an Uncle Sam or a Goddess of Liberty. One dealer welcomed customers himself, by having his own portrait figure carved in wood, all dressed up in the uniform of the military company he belonged to.

Lord Dundreary was another bright idea in the search for something different. This comedy Englishman, with his affected ways, struck America's funny-bone in a big way when the elder Sothorn acted the role in a stage hit of Civil War days.

Cigar store figures even won civic fame. One wooden bandmaster was voted the first citizen of Coldwater, Michigan, when the townfolks warred over priority of families.

Such figures as these, that joined the wooden Indian tribe, are included in the group of 36 "Indians" that the WPA artists have so far chosen for the art

index. The artists have made water color sketches of the statues, so that the figures can be seen in their true colors in the portfolio.

It is easy to understand why Americans have taken cigar store art lightly, particularly the Indian figures. At first glance, a wooden Indian is apt to remind you of a puzzle—the kind labeled, “what’s wrong with this picture?”

### Feathers Wrong

You look up at the headdress, and instead of the stiff feathers from an eagle or hawk that an Indian would have stuck there, you may find a wooden Indian nonchalantly wearing droopy, curling feathers. It looks queer, and a little foolish.

There must be a reason for those feathers. Perhaps it can be traced to the Pocahontas influence. Remember Indian Princess Pocahontas was carried to England and received at Court, after she married John Rolfe. Her portraits then show her in formal attire, holding an ostrich feather fan. So, when honest woodcarvers tackled a Pocahontas job, they may have been awed into giving her plumes instead of Indian feathers for her hair. Or, perhaps there is another explanation, for xylanthropologists to uncover.

From the headdress, your eye wanders critically over the wooden Indian’s costume, and you wonder why he, or she, is so bundled in clothes. The tobacco-

leaf skirt, so often worn by these figures, is a good advertising idea. But why a knee-length petticoat under the grass skirt? And some Pocahontases in wood even have laced-in waists like something out of Godey’s Lady’s Book. It is most un-Indian.

There’s a reason for everything. And the over-dressed cigar store Indian girls doubtless were considered pretty daring in their day, with knees showing, and right on the street, too. Early colonists got used to seeing redskins in their native costumes, which were often scant. But later city-bred Americans weren’t used to it. Don’t forget the chief vogue of the wooden Indian was in the Victorian era.

There’s no denying that wooden Indians aren’t always good as Indians, realistically. But as folk art, with their quaintness traced to psychological reasons, they have a charm of their own.

### British Origin

Probing their origin leads back to the days when Pocahontas herself was alive, according to some historians of the wooden Indian tribe. That was in James the First’s reign, and apothecary shops sold the American tobacco in England.

To mark the counter where tobacco was sold, they set up a sign, in the usual English fashion of contriving some sort of sign for each important line of goods. The baker’s sign was a sheaf of wheat outside his door. The cutler had

a pair of shears for a sign. The tobacco sign at first was a Negro boy clad in tobacco leaf kilt, possibly because the British confused Indians who smoked tobacco with Negroes who raised it in Virginia. Or possibly, these woodcarvers knew too little about Indians to make any better portrait.

In America, there was no such confusion. Indians were well known to be the first people to smoke tobacco, and the ones who introduced the weed to white men. So, Indians became the prevailing cigar ads.

While white men carved Indians, the Indians were carving white men from wood, and making them look just as quaint as the red men in front of cigar stores. Not that the Indians were trying to get even. Nor did they want to imitate the white man’s notions of shop-keeping. They were not turning out wooden white men to advertise guns, glass beads, or saddles. The wooden white men served in magic, or to further the social ambitions of some red man or his wife.

Scientific explorers have been bringing to light some of these wooden white men, found during visits to remote tribes, thereby shedding light on what white men look like to Indians, as subjects for art.

### Wooden Scot

Curious Indian staffs, now in the U. S. National Museum at Washington, D. C., are carved at the top with the portrait of an unmistakable Scotsman. These staffs have been prized possessions of Indian medicine men in jungles of northern South America and Panama. And the Scot is not merely a white man, but is a picture of Dr. William Patterson, who lived in Panama about 1700.

So marvelous were the cures wrought by this doctor, in Indian estimation, that they made him their god of medicine. His cult is still growing, spreading through a wide region of the tropics. An Indian medicine man who has a wooden image of Dr. Patterson can consult with his departed Scottish colleague and get help in treating patients, so these Indians believe.

The best Indian carvers have been remarkably careful in costuming Dr. Patterson. Some Dr. Pattersons are carved wearing old-fashioned Sunday best, with high hat and green frock coat. Other Dr. Pattersons wear walking togs, with cap on head and stout cane in hand, just as the good doctor must have appeared when he went his rounds in Panama, over 200 years ago.



THREE OF A KIND

Three variations on the wooden Indian theme: The bandmaster was a famous figure in Coldwater, Michigan, where he was once voted First Citizen. The Indian maid shows how Victorian propriety dressed an Indian maid in knee-length skirt and long-sleeved blouse. The bearded Turk was the choice of a tobacconist who wanted novelty.

Whatever the costume, though, there is no mistaking the sharp, long-nosed profile of this character. The least skillful Indian carver gets the beak-like nose, even if he fails even to attempt European costumes. The most skillful attain a clever portrait.

Nowadays, the doctor may be portrayed riding an airplane for speed. One of these toy-like carvings has two long-nosed figures flying in acrobat style on the wings of the plane. After all, if one Dr. Patterson is good in magic, two Dr. Pattersons ought to be unbeatable.

Up Alaska way, scientific records show the most curious wooden white man of them all, on an Indian totem pole.

The story is told by Herbert Krieger, ethnologist of the U. S. National Museum, who has an old picture of this pole. He says that a Secretary of the Interior visited Alaska just after the Civil War. One Indian who played host to the great man was so impressed by the honor that later on, when it was time to set up his totem pole, it seemed right and proper to put high on it a portrait of this official from Washington.

The Indian artist carved the frock coat, checked trousers, and stove-pipe hat. But when it came to the face, he didn't know what the visiting white man had looked like. But he did find a newspaper picture of Abraham Lincoln. So the features of Lincoln were combined with the portrait, and everybody was satisfied.

Another totem pole with a wooden white man standing stiffly on top was ordered for the social prestige of an Indian woman. She was first of her tribe to sight a white man.

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"Monkey's dinner bell" is the nickname of a South American plant with seed pods that pop loudly when ripe.

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### STONE AGE HOME

Housekeepers of 4,000 years ago were not nearly so primitive as many suppose, this restoration of a Neolithic house shows. The illustration on the front cover of this week's SCIENCE NEWS LETTER shows the exterior of timber-frame construction filled in with clay-plastered panel.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY

## Rebuild European Homes Of Forty Centuries Ago

See Front Cover

HOUSES in which our ancestors lived at the time of Christ, and 2,000 years before then, are shown restored in full size and original condition at a new open-air museum in the North German city of Luebeck.

They may be considered ancestral homes of Englishmen as well as of Continental Germanic-speaking peoples, for the tribes that colonized Britain and gave rise to what we call the Anglo-Saxon culture started from this part of the European mainland.

The two houses stand a little distance from each other in the park, each an exact restoration in architecture, building materials and interior furnishings, according to the best information scientists have been able to obtain.

The restoration of the older of the two houses, showing a New Stone Age farmstead of about 2000 B. C., is a rectangular building with a steeply pitched roof of thatch. The ridgepole of the roof

is supported on two stout upright posts and projects at either end.

The framework of the house is of stout, rough, unsquared timbers, and the spaces between are filled in with panels of "wattle-and-daub," that is, coarse wicker work plastered with clay. The windows are square, and quite small.

Within, there is a central hearth of stones, with a hole in the roof to let the smoke escape. There is no chimney. Shelves against the wall and strings from the beams support the cooking and table utensils—well-shaped and neatly decorated pottery vessels of assorted shapes and sizes. The man's weapons—bow with stone-tipped arrows, spear, and stone war ax—lean against one of the wooden supporting posts.

In a second room to the rear are stored supplies and a stone handmill for grinding the grain. Women worked hard in those early days.

The second house, dated about the beginning of the Christian era, shows