

Is That So?

By EUGENE BURNS
Ranger-Naturalist

The time when the first group of happy, laughing children rolled up huge snowballs and piled them one on another, stuck in coals for eyes, a cornucopia pipe, and mops for arms to make a snowman goes back into antiquity. But just 100 years today was born the wonderful art of creating masterpieces in snow sculpture in the little town of Brattleboro, Vermont.

A young man, Larkin Goldsmith Mead, worked as a clerk in Brattleboro's hardware store. When not weighing nails or selling horse-shoes, he could usually be found carving figurines from yellow bars of laundry soap, or modeling little animals in clay.

On the last day of the year, 1857, there was a deep fall of damp snow. Walking back from the store the 22-year-old clerk scooped up a handful—and unconsciously began shaping it. And with it, a sudden inspiration struck him.

That night, after the town had gone to bed and the moon rode high, Larkin made his way to the village square with a shovel and trowel and worked almost the night through, creating a snow angel.

The New Year's Day, he was Brattleboro's hero—everyone knew it had to be young Larkin Mead. On the strength of this achievement and encouraged by friends, he resigned his job at the store to study sculpture in New York.

Two years later, Larkin came back and in gratitude decided to make a repeat performance. On this occasion, he enlisted the help of several local boys and they erected in snow a truly dazzling recording angel with a book.

Early Risers Amazed

The local paper ran an ecstatic front-page story:

"Transcendently beautiful stood the Snow Angel in the prismatic glow of the morning sun's reflection. The early risers and pedestrians about town were amazed, when they drew near, to see a statue of such exquisite contour and grace of form, with such delicate modelings and dimplings in details as to suggest the use of a chisel, and that only in a master hand."

Fortunately the cold weather held and visitors came from afar to acclaim the angel.

From his original adventure in snow sculpture, Larkin Mead went on to other creations but these were interrupted during the Civil War when he joined the Union forces as an illustrator-correspondent for Harper's weekly. During this period he did the beloved Springfield statue of Lincoln.

Now it may be in the realm of possibility that the idea of snow figures goes far beyond this. One legend has it that King John, one snowy January morning in 1212, found in the courtyard a grinning white effigy of himself, a pot for crown, a faggot for a scepter.

At any rate, Vermonters take pride in their son and claim he made the first real snow sculpture... and point this out to the students of nearby Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, who each year decorate their campus with an elaborate exhibit of snow figures—the subjects ranging from skiers to elephants.

As for Larkin Mead, his pieces though not many range across the land, from the Stanford University Palo Alto, across to the Fathers of Waters at the headwaters of the Mississippi at Minneapolis, the already mentioned monument of Lincoln at Springfield; a heroic figure of Vermont atop the State Capital, figures of Ethan Allen in both Montpelier and in Washington's Hall of Statuary; and the equestrian statue of George Washington in Union Square, New York.

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