

Everyone Loves Butler's Wooden Fireman!



The Legend of Butler's Wooden Fireman

By Tom Fox

Many years ago, as a youth, I was one of the lucky ones to get a summer job through the State of New Jersey's at risk troubled youth program. Times were tough and in truth I got lucky. The job that I was assigned to do was to paint the insides of the Butler firehouse as well as the Butler police station. Every morning for the entire summer I rode my bike from Riverdale to Butler, rain or shine entering the park and looking up at the Wooden Fireman that stood so proud and strong high up on the front balcony overlooking the park and The Borough of Butler. It was always a moving moment for me.

Recently I was asked to write an article on the Wooden Fireman and I proudly accepted that mission. *Here is what I found:*

The Legend of Butlers Wooden Fireman

Back in the 1800s, Main Street in Butler was a busy place. People from all throughout the area would enter the town to shop there. To make the stores easily recognizable, the proprietors would set out a familiar looking sign or object so that visitors knew who sold what and where.

The barber hung out his candy cane striped pole while the pharmacy of the time, selling medicines and tonics, hung a sign with the familiar symbol of a Mortar and Pestle, the tools used for crushing and mixing of various ingredients.

Stores that sold cigars often used a statue of a wooden Indian, carved by local skillet craftsmen. One of those such skilled craftsmen was a local man named John Campbell but instead of carving a large Indian figure, He was hired to carve a wooden statue of a fireman that would sit upon the Fireman's Insurance Company Building located at 10 Park Ave., overlooking the city of Newark. When finished, the wooden fireman stood at an impressive 8 feet tall, his command horn held in his left hand, his right pointing directions to his men...was an impressive sight.

Locals seeing the Fireman sitting high up on the building often affectionately referred to him as "The Iron Fireman", unaware that he was actually made of wood. For 40 years the "Iron Fireman" stood on top of the building, watching life go by. No matter what was happening, he saw it all.

He stood watch in the sun and cold, in the heat and the hail. When fair winds blew upon him as well as when fowl winds pelted him, he stood strong throughout it all. Then suddenly, in the spring of 1909, the statue was removed and the old Fireman's Insurance building was torn down to make way for a new skyscraper. For the next year, the Wooden Fireman was stored at a secondhand lumber yard. Although down and out of sight, the Wooden fireman was not forgotten as over the past 40 years he had become a beloved famous figure to many people, especially to the firemen in Northern New Jersey.

In the little town of Butler, located 30 miles to the North of Newark, two volunteer firefighters, John Williams and John Spellman discussed ways to rescue the wooden fireman from the lumber yard. When asked what they planned to do with the large statue, the answer was "put it on top of the balcony of the firehouse, overlooking the park and grand stand of course." A plan was made and the two men set off in a wagon to retrieve the statue.

John and John were excited after arriving at the lumber yard and the Iron Fireman was quickly loaded onto their flatbed wagon. Soon they thought, the statue would be stationed at its new home in Butler...or so they thought. Unknown to the two Butler Firemen, other fire departments also wanted the statute, The Bloomfield fire Department being one. When the members of the Bloomfield Fire Department heard that the statue was being moved to Butler and that it would be passing through their town, a plan was hastily put together to ambush and steal the statue from the Butler duo and take it back to their fire department. As the two men rumbled along the country road that glorious day, passing through Bloomfield and heading back to Butler, it seemed that all things were good.

Suddenly numerous men emerged from the woods and a shout went out "Highwaymen!" A struggle pursued and fists flew. Suddenly the Butler firefighters realized that it was not them that the robbers were after but it was the "Chief"; the wooden statue. A tug of war ensued as the two groups struggled and then suddenly, the Chief's left leg was broken off. Seeing this, the Bloomfield men retreated and the two Butler firefighters quickly left the area.

After the two men with the statue arrived safely back in Butler, they took the broken statue to a friend, August Mayer to look at it. Mayer was known to both men as a “Jack of all Trades” and if anyone could fix the statute, he could!

After looking at the leg and seeing the extent of the damage, Mayer told the two Johns that it could not be fixed, it needed to be replaced and he would do it and make it look like new. Plans were quickly made for a grand ceremony and everyone would come out to see the unveiling of The Chief just before the big event.

August invited John and John to see his finished work. “Beautiful”, they said. New fresh paint and a new leg. But something did not look right. “His feet, look at his feet!”, exclaimed Williams. It was then that August realized that he had modeled the new foot after the right foot and now the Chief had two right feet!

Both Johns laughed at the error as August stood in embarrassment. “Don’t worry”, one of the Johns called out, I have an idea.

The big day arrived and people from all throughout the area came out to witness the dedication. The band played, speeches were made and everyone applauded. The citizens of Butler greatly cheered when John Williams started to present the wooden fireman. “Friends, you may have heard that our Chief has two right legs. This is true and it makes him even more special. This may be the only time that you will ever hear that two rights makes a wrong”.

After thinking about it, the crowd started to smile and laugh and clap and carry on. It was at that moment that the people of Butler accepted The Chief, *their* chief, into their Community.

In 1983, a new firehouse was built just around the corner on Carey Ave. The firefighters knew that the Chief could not remain in the outdoors much longer and a decision was made to add a special place for him in the new firehouse on Carey Avenue. Today you can drive past the new fire house and see “The Chief” standing tall high up in a special front window watching the comings and goings of the people below, much like he did watching the people of Newark many years ago...