

The Megaphone

Museums Association of Saskatchewan - November 28, 2011



meg·a·phone [*meg-uh-fohn*] –*noun*

1. a cone-shaped device for magnifying or directing the voice, chiefly used in addressing a large audience out of doors or in calling to someone at a distance.

www.dictionary.com

Hello everyone,

In this month's Megaphone we feature the Willow Bunch Museum, specifically their widely popular exhibit on Édouard J. Beauré, The Willow Bunch Giant.

The Willow Bunch Museum is a historic artifact in itself, located in a Convent school built by the Sisters of the Cross in 1914. Today the museum occupies 2 full floors of the building and has 10 rooms. One full room is dedicated to Édouard Beauré.

People from all over the world visit the Willow Bunch Museum to see the life-sized statute of Édouard and his

exhibit. In order to understand this fascination we need to know the history of who Édouard Beauré was and what makes his story so interesting.

The following article is written by Édouard's nephew Ovila Lespérance. It is an extract from the book [Poplar Poles and Wagon Trails](#). We were able to re-print it for this issue of Megaphone after being given permission from the Willow Bunch Museum.

Joseph Edouard Beauré, born January 9, 1881, in Willow Bunch was the eldest son of Gaspard Beauré and Florestine Piché. His father measured 5' 8" and his mother 5' 4". At birth Edouard Beauré weighed in at nine pounds; he seemed normal in every respect. Reverend Pierre St. Germain O.M.I. baptized him the same day. His godparents were the illustrious Jean Louis Légaré, and Florestine Piché.

A normal child until he was three years old, he suddenly started growing in an alarming way, so much so that at age nine his height measured 6', at 12 years 6' 6", and at 17 years he had reached 7' 1".

He lived in Willow Bunch and attended school very irregularly. He had difficulty speaking English and trouble writing French.

At 17 years old, he lifted an 800 pound horse.

In 1901, when he measured 7' 9", he apparently lifted a 900 pound weight and fractured a leg. After that he very prudently never lifted more than 900 pounds.

While in Montréal, Que., March 25, 1901, Edouard wrestled Louis Cyr, who was known as one of the strongest men. The match was very short, Cyr winning the match, because Edouard didn't dare to really touch him, probably because of his gentle nature.

A few weeks after that, Edouard traveled to the United States where he worked on a ranch in Montana, to realize a dream of becoming a cowboy. Unfortunately for him, this life, which he enjoyed while working with horses, didn't last very long. His height and his weight would lead him away from the trade of his dream.

Meanwhile he had met an American who had convinced him to join the circus for a living. Before that, he had never shown any desire to exhibit himself. Now and then he would like to make a few feats of strength, but never to earn a living.

Around 21 years old, when he chose the life of the circus, he measured 7' 11" and weighed 365 pounds. His neck measured 21 inches in circumference, and his hands 12 and a half inches from the wrist to finger tips. His thorax (chest) measured 56 inches and his shoes, a size 22, always had to be made special order.



Standing: Prudent Lapointe. Sitting: Jean Louis Legare.
Center: Edouard Beaupré.
Right: Gaspard Beaupré (the Giant's father).

Many tried every second or third month to marry Edouard to the tallest woman in the world, Miss Ella Ewing, a giantess. She measured around 7' 6", but he was not at all interested.

In December of 1903, Edouard measured 8' 2 1/2". In 1904, at 23 years old, he joined the circus at the World's Fair in St. Louis, Mo. He weighed 370 pounds and measured 8' 3". His hat was size 10 and his collar size 27. He was featured at the Fairyland on the Pike. Every night of the exposition he would amaze young and old with feats of strength. He was regarded as a phenomenal character. The public was not aware of the strain endured by Edouard as he realized his feats. After every presentation he was left feeling very weary, and couldn't sleep on account of a persistent cough; he would succumb to tuberculosis.

Edouard Beaupré died July 3, 1904, around 1:15 a.m. at the Emergency Hospital on the World's Fair Ground in St. Louis. J.H. Noël who was with him that night describes his last moments: "Around 11:45 the presentation finished. At midnight, feeling very tired, he drank a cup of tea. Instantly he felt a sharp thoracic (chest) pain. He began coughing and spitting blood. I showed him the blood. He remarked that he had a burning sensation around his lungs. He tried to undress but was unable. I convinced him to see a doctor, he accepted. Then Edouard added 'I will die, it's so sad to die so young and so far away from dear parents.' He asked for a glass of water. I ran to get water and at my return he was already unconscious. The ambulance transported him to the Emergency Hospital where he died a few minutes later."

The body was immediately transported to the St. Louis morgue, and Dr. R.B.H. Gradwohl performed an autopsy. It revealed a tumour on his pituitary gland, which is what made him grow to a miraculous height of 8' 3" inches.

The corpse was then sent to the undertaker, Eberle and Keyes, to be embalmed and prepared for the funeral. It was then to be returned to Willow Bunch by William Burke, manager of the circus. They later refused to pay for the expenses.

When Gaspard heard of his eldest son's death, he travelled to Winnipeg, Man., to return the body home. But the Willow Bunch cheese-maker was told he'd have to pay double fare for the giant's body, plus his own fare. With seven children and a meager income, Gaspard couldn't afford such a price. He went home feeling helpless, but reassured by the circus manager's promise to bury the body in St. Louis.

Edouard's body stayed in the possession of the undertakers. After a while they displayed his body in a store window on Broadway, near Market Street, for profit. This was reported to authorities which ordered the body removed. This happened twice, the second time in East St. Louis. After that, the family rarely mentioned the giant's tragedy. It was a little too hard for his parents to accept. Edouard's father was a simple, honest man who settled in Willow Bunch in the early 1870s, and he took every man at his word. He assumed his son had been buried.

Close to 20 years after his son's death, Gaspard heard that Edouard's body was still around, but wasn't sure if it was true or mere rumour.

Actually, the body had been brought back to Montréal where it was on display for more than six months in the spacious lobby of the Eden Museum, next to the National Monument on St-Laurent Street. Because there were so many curious people, pushing and shoving, the municipal authorities put an end to those visits and found him a more discreet place.

In the spring of 1907, Edouard's corpse was found in a hangar at the Bellerive Park, a Park that still exist on Notre-Dame Street, across from Dufresne Street. The circus had gone bankrupt and they had inadvertently forgotten the corpse. It was found by children who were playing. A Doctor from Mansonville, Que., was called and he immediately contacted his colleague, Dr. Louis Napoléon Delorme, professor at the Montréal University. They had the corpse transported to the Anatomy department for a fee of \$25.00. Edouard's body was immediately put through a special procedure to mummify his corpse, by Dr. Delorme, then kept in a glass shrine where he could rest in peace, away from all the curious onlookers.

Early in 1970, I, Ovila Lespérance, discovered my uncle's body on display in Montréal. I had been helping Willow Bunch prepare for its 100th Anniversary Celebrations. If I could return the giant's body to Willow Bunch in time for the anniversary, I decided, it would make a nice memorial.

But the university wouldn't release Edouard's body. They feared someone would dig him out of his grave and display him once again. So the body remained in Montréal.

In 1975 my wife, Evelyn, and I went to Montréal and saw the body. The sight was a bit of a shock. Edouard's giant body had shrunk to 7' 1". Withered from the years, he weighed only 75 lbs. When he died at age 23, he was 375 lbs.

Known medically as a pathological giant, Edouard Beaupré, whose pituitary gland had gone "wild" by age three, had outgrown his parents by age nine. By age 18, he had even outgrown

a typical prairie living. And though most of the settlers around Willow Bunch ranch, Edouard was so big he couldn't sit on a horse without dragging his feet. So, to earn a living he joined the circus where he performed feats of strength until his death.

Next to mythical characters such as Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill, Edouard Beaupré is still regarded as one of the tallest men to have ever lived.

To us, however, Edouard was simply a trusting man who was exploited because of his size. I determined to give my uncle the privacy and respect he deserved, and renewed my request for the giant's body.

The University finally granted it in September, 1989, providing the body be cremated. I agreed.

With the help of my sister, Josie, and her daughter, Cécile, Uncle's body was cremated. They kept his ashes in Montréal until July 1, 1990. On July 7, 1990, Edouard Beaupré received the memorial service and burial his family had dreamed of since the start of this century, in Willow Bunch. His ashes were buried in front of a life-sized statue dedicated to him at the Willow Bunch Museum.

After 85 years of being on public display, naked, and mummified, he is finally at peace.

It marks the end of a tragic story of exploitation that's left us all feeling relieved that he is finally laid to rest.

*Recently it has been discovered that the Giant's Godmother was Florenstine Piche Beaupre's sister Isabelle Piche Desmarais and not his mother.



The Willow Bunch Museum is honouring Édouard by having the life-sized monument and the exhibit dedicated to Edouard's life and story.

Recently, the museum has attracted media attention on Édouard's story. These include 3 different television productions which focus mainly on the Willow Bunch Giant.

- 1.) One of a series by Productions Rivard from Winnipeg, Manitoba
- 2.) A company called "Ma Caravane" which will be aired this November sometime on TVA, a French channel.
- 3.) "The Discovery Channel" who were working on a project on some of the world's famous deceased people and their "weird wishes" in their "wills". This was supposed to air on TV across Canada, the USA and parts of Europe later this year.

"We hope that this will play a positive effect on our museum and increase tourist traffic to our wonderful small community of Willow Bunch." – Doris Y. O'Reilly, Museum President

Headstone covering the Giant's ashes,
buried in front of the statue.

After speaking with Nichole Gellner, a volunteer at the museum we learned that the Willow Bunch Museum itself has even more to offer its visitors. The museum has 9 other rooms filled with history and artifacts donated by local and former residents. Although the Édouard room is very popular, the museum is now encouraging visitors to spend more time at the museum viewing all of the other exhibits the museum has to offer.

Another special feature of the Willow Bunch Museum is that they are bilingual. Everything in the museum is displayed in both English and French. They even have bilingual tours available.

“We are pretty proud of our museum!” – Nichole Gellner, Museum Volunteer

For more information on the Willow Bunch Museum please visit their website:
<http://www.willowbunch.ca/museum/>

We would like to thank everyone at the Willow Bunch Museum for sharing information about the museum and Édouard’s story with us. Special thanks to Museum President, Doris Y. O’Reilly for providing us with the information on Édouard Beaupré and the Willow Bunch Museum.

The December issue of Megaphone will be our holiday issue. Send us your holiday events and they will appear in the next issue of Megaphone! Please send details of your event to Brittany Knudsen, Communications Coordinator, communications@saskmuseums.org.