

# “The Most Wonderful Thing I Have Ever Seen”

## Indiana’s Contribution to Petrified Man Hoaxes

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A petrified human body has never been scientifically documented.<sup>1</sup> However, despite the lack of evidence, a number of so-called petrified human bodies were discovered in America in the period from 1850 to 1935, including one in Evansville, Indiana, in 1902. All of these discoveries were hoaxes—perpetrated by profit seekers, perpetuated by pseudosciences, but believed by a curious public.

The Evansville discovery coincided with the United States government’s ambitious program to improve national transport by dredging the Ohio River, and building locks, dams, and dikes along it. One of the local entrepreneurs who took advantage of the opportunities that came with such projects was John G. Eigenman. Born in Germany in 1837,

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<sup>1</sup>Petrification is the replacement of once-living tissue by secondary minerals, which leads to an increase in hardness and weight, as in the case of fossils. Mummification is the preservation of once-living creatures through embalming or through a natural process whereby a once-living creature comes to rest in a bog, in a very arid environment, or is frozen (as with the famous “ice man”). In many cases, a mummified body was either incorrectly thought or simply said to have been petrified.



John Eigenman in the 1860s. By 1902, the aging businessman and war hero faced a gloomy future, unless he could come up with a strategy that might bring him a large sum of money.

S. F. Horrall *History of the Forty-Second Indiana Volunteer Infantry*, 1892

Eigenman had come to America in 1857, finally settling in the Ohio River town of Rockport, Indiana. His service in the Civil War earned him the title of Captain and a reputation for grit and resourcefulness.<sup>2</sup> After the war, he became a respected contractor (“builder of public buildings”) and supervised the dredging of gravel bars in the Ohio River.

By 1902, the river had “receded down to its rock, sand, and gravel bottom; . . . [and] new bars of gravel [were] rapidly appearing” at “a number of new, troublesome places between Louisville and Evansville.”<sup>3</sup> In September, Eigenman, contracted that fall to dredge the Evansville waterfront, ordered his crew to unload a barge of sand onto the river bank at the front of Pine Street. While the laborers struggled to unload the barge, Eigenman later recalled that he noticed something that looked like a body lying in the murky water, and immediately sent two of his

<sup>2</sup>S. F. Horrall, *History of the Forty-Second Indiana* (n.p., 1892), 144; *Dale Weekly Reporter*, May 3, 1907.

<sup>3</sup>“River News,” *Rockport Journal*, September 19, 1902.

men to drag the object onto the bank of the river. The workers, according to local press accounts, discovered the body of a small man, seemingly turned to stone. Under Eigenman's orders, they hastily stored the grisly find in a nearby building until Eigenman could figure out what to do with it.<sup>4</sup>

Such an astounding find could not be kept under wraps for long; a large crowd of the curious quickly gathered to see what one local paper labeled the "ghastly relic." Nevertheless, Captain Eigenman ordered the discovery stored in a locked shed so that his men could return to work. A reporter for the *Evansville Daily Journal* arrived in time to view the object before the doors were slammed and locked. He filed a news story describing the figure as "five and a half feet in height with a powerful chest" and with clearly distinguishable facial features. On the figure's left hand, he wrote, onlookers could see not only a ring, but fingernails and even "every wrinkle on the digits."<sup>5</sup>

An unfortunate reporter for the rival city newspaper, the *Evansville Courier*, did not arrive before Eigenman hid the surprising discovery from public view. But Eigenman did allow him to accompany a small group of doctors and other "men of science" as they made a cursory examination of the bizarre figure that evening. By that time, Eigenman had moved the object to the vault of a building at the corner of Second and Main Streets. The reporter's description of his sojourn into that dark and damp room appeared the next day under the evocative title "How 'Petrified Man' Looked by Candlelight: Description of the Image as It Appeared to a Layman": "As the vault door swung back and the light of the candle carried by the members of the party fell on the object lying on the floor, it looked for all the world like it might be a man . . . such a life-like expression about the features that a person might almost imagine this inanimate object, this stone, might be endowed with life."<sup>6</sup>

Many people—including some local so-called "scientific men"—did imagine that the stone figure was a genuinely petrified human body. One in the party of those who had viewed the object on the night of its discovery observed that "the regularity of the bones about the neck and shoulders convince me that the body is petrified. There can be no doubt

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<sup>4</sup>"Finding a Petrified Body," *ibid.*, October 3, 1902.

<sup>5</sup>"Petrified Body of Man Is Found," *Evansville Daily Journal*, October 1, 1902.

<sup>6</sup>"Petrified Body of Man Found That of Son of Founder," *Evansville Courier*, October 1, 1902.



Dredging the banks of the Ohio River, ca. 1900. Dredging operations occasionally yielded more than just the customary rock, sand, and gravel.

Courtesy of the Special Collections Department of Willard Library, Evansville, Indiana

about that fact.” Another openly expressed his desire to drill into one of the legs to ascertain whether or not a cavity lay below the surface where the bone should be, saying, “this would prove conclusively that the petrification was genuine.” A local doctor declared that several details about the object convinced him it was “not a fake so far as being petrified is concerned.”<sup>7</sup>

Some Evansville citizens were not as certain of the object’s authenticity, a fact brought to light by one reporter for the *Evansville Courier*. The writer claimed that the “scientific men” were still unsure of whether the object was “the remains of a human being or an artificially prepared specimen,” adding that while “personally they all believe the image to be a genuine specimen of petrification, scientifically they are in doubt.”<sup>8</sup>

But most citizens wished to believe, and were encouraged to do so by the retelling of past reports of petrified bodies. On October 2, 1902—a month after Eigenman’s find—the *Evansville Courier* published a letter

<sup>7</sup>“Petrified Body of Man Is Found,” *Evansville Daily Journal*, October 1, 1902.

<sup>8</sup>“The Petrified Man,” *Evansville Courier*, October 1, 1902.

from a reader who recalled that as a small child she had heard her parents discuss the case of a body that had petrified after being buried for twelve years: "When the workmen reached the body which they were disinterring, they found it to be too heavy to move, and after securing assistance in taking the body from the grave it was found to be in a perfect state of petrification."<sup>9</sup>

Because Eigenman's discovery had this historical precedence and "scientific" support, a wave of petrified man fever swept across Evansville and the rest of the state. On October 3, Indiana Governor Winfield Durban, accompanied by his staff and several friends, journeyed south from Indianapolis to view the astonishing specimen. The governor was not content merely to view the body; the press reported that he critically examined every part of it. Afterward, Governor Durbin, "a personal friend of Capt. Eigenman," announced: "There is no doubt but that that specimen is the genuine petrified body of a man. It is the most wonderful thing I have ever seen, and I am greatly interested in it." Upon seeing the specimen for themselves, some of the women who had accompanied the governor to Evansville were reported to have given "little shudders, little screams, and little sighs."<sup>10</sup>

The governor's observations further helped a credulous public to accept the object. With that acceptance, the public's imaginative musings about how the man came to be greatly increased. At first glance it had appeared that the body was that of a drowning victim, but closer examination revealed "evidence of a foul murder." Observers noticed the unnatural positioning of the arms, rope marks on the upper arms and lower legs, the noticeable lack of bloating (leading many to assume that the man had been dead before the body was placed in the river), and a round hole in the chest (suggesting a bullet wound).<sup>11</sup>

Connecting the stone object to murderous events ultimately prompted several people to suggest a possible identity for the petrified man. Telegraph messages and letters began to pour into Evansville from around the country. They typically requested that Eigenman provide more details about the body, and "in almost every case," as the *Evansville Courier* reported, "the theory is advanced that the image is probably the

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<sup>9</sup>"Petrified after Being Buried Twelve Years," *ibid.*, October 2, 1902.

<sup>10</sup>"Governor and Party View the Wonderful Stone Man," *ibid.*, October 3, 1902.

<sup>11</sup>"Doctors Open Head of Stone Man," *ibid.*, October 4, 1902.

remains of some relative of the inquirer who had mysteriously disappeared.”<sup>12</sup>

The *Evansville Courier* itself advanced the notion that the petrified body was that of Dee (DeWitt) Evans, son of Evansville founder General Robert M. Evans. The paper described an 1867 boating accident that had claimed the life of the younger Evans, along with those of John App and two other men. Their skiff had overturned in the Ohio during a freak storm; searchers recovered only young App’s body.

On the morning of the Evans claim, the *Evansville Daily Journal* offered a competing claim: the petrified man was likely the “body of Bill LaRue, long lost.” The article explained that several people who had seen the stone man thought it closely resembled LaRue, who had worked as a watchman on small tugs in the city’s port and who had disappeared about nine years earlier.<sup>13</sup> Not to be trumped by the *Daily Journal*, the next day the *Courier* ran a long story about an impoverished widow who thought the recently discovered petrified man was her missing spouse. “That is my husband,” she informed the newspaper; “[T]here is not the slightest doubt about it.” Another observer thought “it bore a remarkable resemblance to William Stockton, one of the men who were drowned many years ago at the same time the son of General Evans lost his life.”<sup>14</sup> Money allegedly missing from a bank account played a significant part in another man’s claim that the petrified man was William Patterson, who had accumulated a great deal of money, deposited it in the Vine Grove bank, and then disappeared. After Patterson’s disappearance, his brother discovered the bank account was depleted and suspected foul play. From what he had read in the paper, the brother was convinced that “the description given . . . fits Mr. Patterson” and that a “ring he wore and every other mark as described in the dispatches correspond.”<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most intriguing attempt to identify the stone man came in the form of an anonymous confession to murder. On October 4, 1902, the *Evansville Courier* printed a rambling, unsigned letter. The

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<sup>12</sup>“Finding of Image Recalls Tragedies,” *ibid.*, October 5, 1902.

<sup>13</sup>“Petrified Body of Man Is Found: Gravel Dredge Turns Up a Remarkable Find, Supposed to Be the Body of Bill LaRue, Long Missing,” *Evansville Daily Journal*, October 1, 1902.

<sup>14</sup>“Woman Claims Petrified Man Is the Body of Her Husband,” *Evansville Courier*, October 2, 1902.

<sup>15</sup>“Finding of Image Recalls Tragedies,” *ibid.*, October 5, 1902.



Evansville, ca. 1900. In spite of their city's increasing modernization, many Evansville residents were taken in by the petrified man hoax.

Courtesy of the Special Collections Department of Willard Library, Evansville, Indiana.

author claimed that he had watched his brother-in-law kill a western Kentuckian who had been stealing property during the Civil War under the guise of being a confederate partisan fighter. When the letter writer first heard about the discovery of the petrified man, he came to Evansville to see the body first-hand. He was convinced that it was the body of the man he had seen killed many years before. The writer expressed some surprise that the body was not discovered until forty years later, and he freely admitted that he did not know how it had come to be found near Evansville, but he was certain the specimen was the right body.<sup>16</sup> Having lived for forty years with the knowledge of having been party to a murder, the anonymous writer suddenly discovered a way to see his guilt “buried decent” along with the petrified man. He was absolutely convinced the stone object was the man he had seen killed, no matter how much he had to strain fact and belief to do so. In much the same way, the woman who claimed the stone image as her “lost”

<sup>16</sup>“Claims Stone Image is Body of Man Murdered by Brother-In-Law,” *ibid.*, October 4, 1902.

husband ended several years of living with anger and shame at the possibility that he had simply left her. However misguided, such personal responses are to a degree understandable. But the question of why so many citizens of Evansville, and of the region in general, readily accepted the object as a petrified human body still remains.

The people of Evansville were cautioned against their enthusiastic response to the “great discovery,” and were provided with evidence challenging its authenticity. The *Evansville Courier* noted after the initial examination of the object that the left leg was “one-and-a-half inches longer than the right” and that the left arm was also larger than the right one. The same paper also alluded to “The Petrified Cardiff Giant” and other similar petrified man frauds that had been brought to light after just “a few minutes of scientific observation and common sense discourse.”<sup>17</sup> Yet many ignored the reminder of how easily and completely the public could be misled.

Nevertheless, some doubt about the object did begin to emerge. Police Chief Fred Heuke told the *Evansville Courier* that he thought the specimen was “a fake” and said so in response to the several inquiries he had received.<sup>18</sup> The *Courier*, a Democratic newspaper, also printed the observation that the “petrified man” was in reality the body of “a petrified republican office holder” found in the basement of the courthouse.<sup>19</sup>

John Eigenman’s behavior immediately after the discovery suggested that—whether he accepted or rejected the object’s authenticity—he saw its value as an entertainment commodity. After locking the body in a shed, he told a reporter that he was considering exhibiting it in Evansville.<sup>20</sup> An Owensboro, Kentucky, paper also noted that Eigenman had been “made several handsome offers for the peculiar phenomena.”<sup>21</sup> The morning after the discovery, Eigenman did put the body on public display at the corner of Main and Second Streets in Evansville, as advertised in the *Courier*.<sup>22</sup> But not all went well with the production. The

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<sup>17</sup>“Man Drowned in June Answers Description of Stone Man,” *ibid.*, October 3, 1902; and “The Petrified Cardiff Giant,” *ibid.*, October 1, 1902.

<sup>18</sup>“Chief Heuke Pessimistic,” *ibid.*, October 4, 1902.

<sup>19</sup>“An Inquest,” *ibid.*, October 2, 1902.

<sup>20</sup>“Petrified Body of Man is Found,” *Evansville Daily Journal*, October 2, 1902.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>*Evansville Courier*, October 2, 1902.

admission charge was twenty-five cents, causing one woman to declare that she had paid only a dime earlier at another town to see "the woman what was petrified." The upset female offered a dime to see the Evansville version but declared, "I will not pay a quarter."<sup>23</sup> Residents of other areas, however, were willing to accept the charge. Eigenman took the "stone man" on tour to Tell City and Huntingburg and basked in the success of his exhibition.

Challenging Eigenman's scheme was Louis Lamb, one of the men who actually pulled the specimen from the river. A thirty-nine-year-old fisherman, Lamb carried a police record that went back almost twenty years. Most of the charges and convictions involved petty scams. Further records show that "Lamb came from a disordered family that included three brothers and a father whose name appear[ed] frequently in jail records."<sup>24</sup> The calculating Lamb sensed great potential in the petrified human body he and another man had pulled ashore and, without telling Eigenman, had filed suit for a legal determination of the petrified man's rightful owner.<sup>25</sup> Lamb had not expressed any disagreement about the ownership of the specimen at the time it was discovered. Instead, he had quietly quit his job and then filed the suit which claimed the value of the stone man to be \$7,000.<sup>26</sup>

An initial hearing on October 8, 1902, denied Lamb's request for the court to appoint "a receiver to take charge of the specimen," and the issue of rightful ownership was set to be tried later in the month. At that point, the unusual story grew even more bizarre. On October 17, the *Evansville Daily Journal* announced, "Petrified Body Gone: Considerable Excitement Prevails over Its Disappearance," and noted that "no one seems to know where it has gone."<sup>27</sup> Despite the missing relic, the jury trial began on October 30 when Judge James T. Walker convened the circuit court. Early in the proceedings Lamb's attorneys "moved that the defense be made to bring the stone man into the court," but this action was quickly denied, and the plaintiff's case collapsed soon after. By the

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<sup>23</sup>"Governor and Party View the Wonderful Stone Man," *ibid.*, October 3, 1902.

<sup>24</sup>Brian Butler, *An Undergrowth of Folly: Public Order, Race Anxiety, and the 1903 Evansville, Indiana Riot* (New York, 2000), 212.

<sup>25</sup>"Want Petrified Body in Court Room," *Evansville Daily Journal*, October 8, 1902.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>"Petrified Body Gone," *ibid.*, October 17, 1902.

end of the day Eigenman's attorneys petitioned the court to "instruct the jury to bring in a verdict for the defendant on the grounds that the plaintiff had failed to make out a case." Lamb's attorneys asked that the case be dismissed. With no other party contesting his ownership rights, Eigenman gained legal possession of the object.<sup>28</sup>

When the trial dust had settled, the public began to discuss the whereabouts of the petrified body. "What Has Become of the Petrified Man?" the *Evansville Courier* asked. Rumors swirled that Eigenman had secretly locked it away in a secure place or that it had been "slipped away from the city and placed on exhibition in some distant city."<sup>29</sup> What is known for certain is that after two weeks of displaying the specimen before large crowds, Eigenman abruptly closed the doors to the exhibition when he was faced with the possibility of having to produce it in court. No one would admit to having seen the 300-pound object moved from its original location. Several people publicly confirmed that they did not "know the hiding place of the mysterious stone man" but that they were "positive" that Eigenman had not shipped it out of Evansville.<sup>30</sup> Sam Joseph, the financial manager of the stone man exhibition, told a local paper "that the last night of the exhibition he placed the body in the vault in the rear of the building and was preparing to lock the door when Captain Eigenman told him not to turn the combination, as there was no danger of anyone stealing the body. The next day when Mr. Joseph visited the building the vault door was open and the 300 pound stone man was missing."<sup>31</sup> Eigenman fled town soon after the trial ended.

On November 3, 1902, the *Evansville Courier* informed the public that the stone man had been discovered in the Spencer County community of Rockport, where Captain Eigenman was allowing the curious to view it for a fifteen-cent fee. Asked how it had come to be in Rockport, Eigenman replied that it "had come to life and walked the distance."<sup>32</sup> A few days later, the *Rockport Democrat* noted that the many people who viewed the object on display in the Kitchen Building on Main Street

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<sup>28</sup>"Hiding Place of Stone Man a Secret," *Evansville Courier*, October 31, 1902.

<sup>29</sup>"What Has Become of Petrified Man," *ibid.*, October 28, 1902.

<sup>30</sup>"Hiding Place of Stone Man a Secret," *ibid.*, October 31, 1902.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>"Stone Man Located at Rockport, Ind," *ibid.*, November 3, 1902.

“seem to believe that at one time the body had been imbued with life.”<sup>33</sup> This brief report constituted the final appearance of Indiana’s petrified man in the news.

As a tale, Indiana’s petrified man performed several cultural functions. First, it provided a way for the citizens of southern Indiana—especially those who were descended from the original upland settlers—to connect to their history. At the time of the “discovery” Evansville was an urbanizing city, with Germans, African Americans, and other ethnic groups moving steadily into the region in search of work. Migration brought cultural changes, and their impact manifested itself in an attempt to reaffirm the region’s roots among the southern upland population. Several local histories grew out of a growing interest in the area’s pioneer upland past, and, on some level, the petrified man—especially given the amount of human projection placed on it—may have harkened back to an earlier time for many Evansville locals.<sup>34</sup>

The body also performed an epistemological function for the Evansville region. The tale helped people to make sense of—or make use of—rapidly evolving trends in scientific knowledge. Donald Zochert suggests that “one of the several forces set in motion by the flood tide of democracy was the rapid diffusion of science, along with the corollary notion that the common man—no less than the philosopher—could fasten upon it to his advantage.”<sup>35</sup> Scientific knowledge was suddenly accessible by common men, and—as Elizabeth Stewart explains—they were made bold by that “democracy of knowledge,” which allowed anyone to claim scientific standing with little or no real training.<sup>36</sup> One

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<sup>33</sup>*Rockport Democrat*, reprinted in *Owensboro Messenger*, November 9, 1902.

<sup>34</sup>Lawrence Lipin, *Producers, Proletarians, and Politicians: Workers and Party Politics in Evansville and New Albany, Indiana, 1850-1887* (Urbana, Ill., 1994), 77; and Butler, *An Undergrowth of Folly*, 23. Deeper psychological forces may have been at work as well in the cases of petrified man frauds. Scott Poole has noted that the discovery of the so-called Saluda River man held the great interest of the people in that area of the South because of its psychological power. The body was quickly claimed as the petrified remains of a confederate soldier. Poole observed, “The Saluda River petrified man is a perfect symbol for the changing ethos of South Carolina; a public representation of . . . a heroic Confederate past to press into the service of entrepreneurial impulse.” See Scott Poole, *Never Surrender: Confederate Memory and Conservatism in the South Carolina Upcountry*. (Albany, Ga., 2004), 179.

<sup>35</sup>Donald Zochert, “Science and the Common Man in Ante-Bellum America,” *Isis*, 65 (December 1974), 448.

<sup>36</sup>Elizabeth Pritchard Stewart, *Who Shall Decide When Doctors Disagree? Hoaxes and American Men of Science in the Nineteenth Century*, (Washington, DC, 2003), ii.

“learned scholar”—a former school superintendent—spoke to the *Evansville Daily Journal* about the process that created Indiana’s petrified man. “Petrification,” he maintained, “is caused by the action of lime, in soil or extremely hard water, and by gravel beds . . . [t]he body may have lain in the gravel bed, being washed over by the fine rock for two years or an unlimited time beyond that.”<sup>37</sup> Eventually, more authentic and rigorous scientific assessment caught up with these off-the-cuff statements, but during their heyday in places such as Evansville, Stewart contends, these comments (and their attendant hoaxes) were organized to “highlight inconsistencies” in the burgeoning fields of geology and paleontology and “undermine their authority.”<sup>38</sup>

Regardless of whether Indiana’s petrified man is seen as a means of projection to the past, or as a tool to challenge the orthodoxy of scientific knowledge, the tale of the “great discovery” did not last beyond its perpetrators. Louis Lamb would go on to lead a 1903 race riot in Evansville, one of the most violent in Indiana history.<sup>39</sup> John Eigenman died from “blood poisoning due to a carbuncle” in 1909; nothing about the stone man incident was mentioned in Eigenman’s obituary.<sup>40</sup> Although the fracas surrounding Indiana’s own petrified man had occurred only seven years earlier, by that time it would seem very far away indeed.



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<sup>37</sup>*Evansville Daily Journal*, October 1, 1902.

<sup>38</sup>Stewart, *Who Shall Decide When the Doctors Disagree?*, 170.

<sup>39</sup>Butler, *An Undergrowth of Folly*, 212.

<sup>40</sup>*Dale Weekly Reporter*, May 3, 1909.