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July 7, 2016

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TREASURE**

University can't locate
sculptor's prized pieces



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Thursday, July 7, 2016

**ON FRIDAY
MATTHEW ODAM'S
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AUSTIN360**

LOCAL HISTORY

The case of UT's lost Pompeo Coppini statues



Pompeo Coppini's plaster version of a proposed bronze, "Victims of the Galveston Flood," submitted for the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. CONTRIBUTED

The sculptor of South Mall statues also gave the university more than two dozen pieces in 1914. Nobody can find them.

By Michael Barnes

mbarnes@statesman.com

On April 27, John Bernardoni, Austin music promoter and arts backer, met with James Powell, a native Austinite and longtime antiques dealer.

Powell asked Bernardoni, best known locally for helping save the Paramount Theatre, if he knew anything about “Victims of the Galveston Flood,” a sculpture by Pompeo Coppini, the artist best known locally for creating the Littlefield Fountain and the controversial statues on the South Mall at the University of Texas.

Coppini had been in the news of late. Last year, his sculptures portraying Confederate President Jeff Davis and U.S. President Woodrow Wilson were moved after considerable community input. Davis is going to the Briscoe Center for American History, now under renovation, while Wilson’s new home has not been finalized.

Powell showed Bernardoni a photo of a proposed bronze statue devised by Coppini in memory of the most deadly natural disaster in U.S. history, the 1900 Galveston hurricane.

“He said that Galveston’s leaders did not go through with Coppini’s design, saying it was too gut-wrenching,” Bernardoni says. “The plaster version was donated to UT in 1914. James has this dream to have this piece finally realized in bronze.”

Turns out that Powell’s relatives were models for the woman and two children.

Over the course of the next two months, Bernardoni and his helpers raked Texas collections seeking statuary donations by Coppini and have come up, so far, empty-handed.

“My great-grandfather Giovanni Bernardoni, of Pisa, Italy, died in the 1900 storm, along with well over 6,000 other souls,” Bernardoni says. “He left behind my great-grandmother, who could not read or write, and two very young children, including my grandfather John Steven Bernardoni. The Bernardoni family’s life path was forever altered by that event. This particular sculpture has great meaning to me.”

The grand search

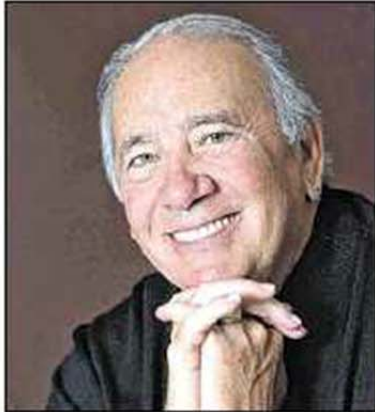
Internationally renowned, Coppini donated as many as 25 statues and busts, mostly of plaster, to UT in 1914, records show.

As a recent big and beautiful book from UT Press, “The Collections,” documents, the university has

Statue continued on **D3**



Pompeo Coppini poses with the goddess that would top the Littlefield Fountain in 1933. UT backer George W. Littlefield wanted to focus on the Civil War; Coppini preferred to hone in on World War I.



Writer, music promoter and arts backer John Bernardoni is trying to discover what became of missing Pompeo Coppini statues that were given to the University of Texas in 1914. CONTRIBUTED

'Coppini continually asked UT over the years to tell him where the "Victims" heroic figure was being held. We have not found a response. He came very close to filing a lawsuit against UT.'

John Bernardoni

Statue

continued from D1

stored more than 170 million objects. Surely so many crated statues can't hide forever.

"I'm running out of leads," Bernardoni says. "We're just beginning to poke around the Pickle Research Campus (in North Austin). It's like the warehouse from the final scene of 'Raiders of the Lost Ark.' Coppini donated 20 crates of his statues to UT in 1914. They're gone, with no record of when or why."

Bernardoni hired a researcher, Ralph Elder, who concluded six weeks of intensive review of the Coppini-Tauch papers and other official UT papers at the Briscoe Center.

He and his team queried the staffs of the Ransom Center, UT's landmarks program, UT's departments of archaeology and classics, the Texas Memorial Museum, the Texas State Preservation Board, the Galveston County Museum, the Rosenberg Library in Galveston, UT Medical School in Galveston, the Coppini Academy in San Antonio, the Galveston Historical Foundation, the Texas State Historical Association, Baylor University's Texas landmarks program and the Martin Museum of Art at Baylor, as well as historians, archaeologists,

archivists and clerks such as David Gracy, Marybeth Tomka, Jim Nicar, Pheobe Allen and Shelly Kelly.

“I didn’t know any of that was here,” says Don Carleton, director of the Briscoe Center, of the Coppini gift statues. “And I’ve been here forever. So this is before forever. The objects come to us in all ways.”

Although he is fascinated with Bernardoni’s search, he’s not surprised it is taking time.

“It’s the case with any huge organization: It’s had thousands, if not tens of thousands, working here since 1883,” he says. “People say that the university did this or the university did that. People do things. Not universities.”

Bernardoni landed a solid lead when he found that Kelly, formerly of the Rosenberg Library, had done an extensive search in 1998 on the vanished “Victims.” Yet Kelly’s job in Galveston kept her from reviewing all the pertinent correspondence housed at the Briscoe.

“Her work, though, has produced a very disturbing story of neglect by UT,” Bernardoni says. “And that is only the beginning. All of it is documented.”

Elder turned up evidence that Coppini crated a 10-foot-high plaster cast for “Victims” for the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904.

Coppini's autobiography, "From Dawn to Sunset," lists 23 plaster models, which could have been among those donated to UT in 1914. The January 1918 edition of the Longhorn Magazine mentions 24 statues and busts stored in the cellar of the Old Main Building: "a princely gift ... but accorded a beggarly reception."

Students stumbled on them in 1918 and insisted on an exhibition.

The Cactus yearbook of 1920 confirms that all or most of the pieces were placed on

show in what is now Sutton Hall. A fire in the Chemistry Building in 1927 might

have destroyed them, but no manifest of lost items has been found.

On March 14, 1943, Waldine Tauch, a sculptor who was Coppini's assistant, wrote UT President Homer Price Rainey asking about the location of the "Victims" cast. Around this time, Coppini was putting together his autobiography, which was published in 1948. He died in 1957.

"Coppini continually asked UT over the years to tell him where the 'Victims' heroic figure was being held," Bernardoni says. "We have not found a response. He came very close to filing a lawsuit against UT."

The possibilities

Like a good detective, Bernardoni lays out the potential solutions to the puzzle.

■ They were moved to a warehouse with the bricks from Old Main in the 1930s before the new UT Tower was constructed. Those bricks were used in construction all over the city, but some might be kept in the vastness of the Pickle campus, a former World War II-era magnesium plant.

■ They were consumed in the 1927 fire that engulfed the Chemistry Building. Bernardoni suspects that campus leaders knew what was burned but stonewalled Coppini for decades.

■ They were damaged while being moved from location to location and thus ultimately discarded. Plaster of Paris is easily broken or chipped.

■ They were sent to another city. But none of the institutions in Galveston, San Antonio or Waco have turned them up.

■ They are sitting in someone's backyard. "Don't laugh," Bernardoni says. "UT historian Jim Nicar told me that he found a UT treasure in a backyard, which UT ended up buying back from the owner of that home."

Bernardoni is not giving up. He plans to appeal to UT President Gregory L. Fenves to ask facility managers throughout the UT System to look around.

“What a miracle it would be if the ‘Victims’ heroic or any others were found, intact, almost 100 years later,” he says. “Again, these were originals. It would generate national news and perhaps world coverage, so powerful is the backstory.”

If they are found, Bernardoni is likely to lead a campaign to finance a bronze version of “Victims” for placement in Galveston.

“I am on a mission from God and will not rest until every possible lead and avenue has been explored,” he says. “I cannot believe something this big could just vanish with no record.”

Contact Michael Barnes at 512-445-3970 or mbarnes@statesman.com.
Twitter: @outandabout

POMPEO COPPINI'S 1914 DONATIONS TO UT

These works were listed in a May 11, 1914, letter from UT President Sidney Edward Mezes and university backer George Littlefield.

1. Victims of the Galveston Flood — 10 feet high
2. Washington Statue — 11 feet high
3. Falkenberg — 8 feet high
4. Confederate Soldier — 7 feet high
5. Texas Pioneer — 8 feet high
6. James D. Richardson — 8 feet high
7. Sam Houston Monument Studies — 3
8. Gonzales Statue — height unknown
9. General Robert E. Lee — heroic-size bust
10. Stonewall Jackson — heroic-size bust
11. Albert Sidney Johnson — heroic-size bust
12. President Davis — heroic-size bust
13. Governor Tom Campbell — portrait bust
14. Oscar B. Colquitt — portrait bust
15. Major George W. Littlefield — portrait bust
16. W. P. Wooldridge — portrait bust
17. Dr. Ferdinand Herff Sr. — portrait bust
18. Mrs. Baugh — portrait bust
19. Mr. Cook — portrait bust
20. General Joe Wheeler — portrait bust
21. Lieutenant Richmond Hobson — portrait bust
22. Ermine Hallie Rives — portrait bust
23. Dr. Munyon — portrait bust
24. Mark Hamburg — portrait bust
25. General Morgan Equestrian — sketch for statue
26. The Falling Tree — bas-relief tablet



Nude version of the proposed Galveston flood memorial.

<http://www.mystatesman.com/news/lifestyles/the-case-of-uts-lost-pompeo-coppini-statues/nrsFY/>