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## Search is on for vanished sculpture of victims of 1900 hurricane

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By TOM BASSING The Daily News

During a casual lunch conversation, the sort that a casual meal with friends inspires, Austin antiques dealer James Powell asked those at the table whether they had ever heard of a vanished sculpture created four years after the 1900 Storm to honor those who had perished.

“My question had nothing to do with anything else being discussed at that lunch,” said Powell, who owns the eponymous James Powell Antiques shop in Austin. “I’ve been fascinated and mystified by the work’s disappearance; for 55 years, I’ve been asking people about it.”

It has been 97 years since the 10-foot-tall sculpture — “Victims of the Galveston Flood” — was last seen. It was created by Pompeo Coppin, a renowned sculptor and naturalized U.S. citizen.

Powell has a vested interest in the statue.

His relatives had posed for the piece, which depicted a mother, a young girl clinging to her, and a deceased infant cradled in her arms as the hurricane’s trailing winds press against her. A man’s disembodied arm rises from below in a desperate bid to grasp the debris on which the woman precariously stands.

Powell’s great aunt, Mattie Gallagher, then 18 years old, posed as the distraught mother.

“My great aunt was a student of Coppini’s, and they had become close friends,” Powell said.

“Mattie had the most beautiful, perfect and dramatic features I ever saw,” Coppini wrote in his autobiography, “From Dawn to Sunset,” which was published eight years before he died in San Antonio in September 1957.

Mattie's younger sister, Besse, who at the time the piece was created was no older than 9, portrayed the shattered daughter clinging to the woman, and Mattie's niece, Fern, posed as the drowned infant cradled in the mother's arms, Powell said.

### **A shared connection**

John Bernardoni, one of those to whom Powell posed the question during that late April lunch, recalled his interest being instantly piqued; he too had a connection to the disaster.

His great-grandfather, Bernardoni told Powell, had died in the storm, which today remains the deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history. No fewer than 6,000 lives were lost, 20 percent of

Galveston's population at the time. Only the devastating San Francisco earthquake six years later approached it in loss of life.

Since that lunch, Bernardoni, a 68-year-old concert producer who lives in Austin, has been nothing short of obsessed with finding the plaster of Paris sculpture, which Coppini had donated to the University of Texas in 1914 just before he moved to Chicago after having failed to raise the funds needed to realize the work in bronze.

"I told James that my great-grandfather, Giovanni Bernardoni, had died in the storm and left behind a wife, who couldn't read or write, and two children, one of whom was my grandfather," Bernardoni said. "We were told the whole family was safe on the island after the storm, but he went to help a friend and was swept away and drowned."

Giovanni Bernardoni and his wife, Viola, in the 1870s had immigrated to the United States from an Italian village just southeast of Pisa, the city famous for a precariously listing bell tower. They arrived in New Orleans, and eventually made their way to Galveston, where the patriarch perished.

"It changed our family's lives forever," Bernardoni said.

### **'Too painful'**

Powell remembers his grandmother, Estelle, also a friend of Coppini's, telling him that Galveston's leaders chose not to pay to create a bronze version of the sculpture.

"She said she was told it was too painful a reminder, too realistic," he said.

Four years after the storm, Coppini exhibited the piece in his San Antonio studio and recounted in his autobiography the sculpture's effect on those viewing it, particularly those who had survived the tempest.

"Some came who were in that flood or who lost relatives there," he recounted. "They wept as though the group was too real."

The University of Texas put “Victims of the Galveston Flood” on display during the 1919 Christmas holidays in what is now known as Sutton Hall, according to an article in the 1920 student yearbook, “The Cactus.”

Then the sculpture vanished.

“After that article in the yearbook, there’s not another word to be found about that piece’s whereabouts,” Bernardoni said.

### **For the 6,000**

But he remains steadfast in his search, he said. He has hired researchers and contacted dozens of institutions, including the Rosenberg Library and the Galveston Historical Foundation, seeking any clue as to the sculpture’s fate.

Those efforts have been in vain, and he said he is coming to grips with the painful possibility that it no longer exists. If that becomes an inescapable conclusion, he plans to take another tack, he said.

“If it’s never found, it’s my hope that we’re going to find a nationally recognized sculptor who can recreate it in bronze identical to Coppini’s original design,” he said.

For now, however, the search continues. Bernardoni and Powell continue to hold out hope even as hope fades.

“He wants it for his family,” Bernardoni said. “I want it for the 6,000.”

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