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The Great Coppini Caper

BY [DANIELLE LOPEZ](#) IN [40 ACRES](#) ON JULY 26, 2016 AT 3:45 PM | NO COMMENTS

One UT alum's search for 24 statues that mysteriously disappeared from campus



The mystery began at a pizza joint in Dripping Springs, just off of Route 290.

It was April 27 and [John Bernardoni](#), BA '71, a lively man with gray hair and a little emerald stud in his left ear, sat around a table. He was enjoying lunch with his two friends, Lucy Hibberd, BA '63, the daughter of a well-known Austin philanthropist named Roberta Crenshaw, BA '36, and a native Austinite named James Powell, who has long run a small antique shop downtown.

The conversation had been of little note, when Powell mentioned something that would send Bernardoni down a rabbit hole more than 100 years old.



“Have you heard of this missing statue called the ‘Victims of the Galveston Flood?’” Powell asked, referring to a 10-foot-tall sculpture of a woman cradling a dying infant in the midst of a storm as a young girl clings tightly to her waist. “Nobody seems to know where it is.”

Though he’s talkative, Powell says in a sleepy Southern drawl that he’s spent most of his life hoping to find the plaster of Paris statue meant to honor the thousands who died in the [Galveston Storm of 1900](#). The statue was donated to UT, along with 23 others, in 1914 by famous Texas sculptor Pompeo Coppini—the man better known for creating [Littlefield Fountain](#) and UT’s [controversial monument](#) of Jefferson Davis.

With a tinge of nostalgia, Powell explains that the three figures in the statue are modeled after his great aunts and first cousin once removed, who were friends with Coppini during his time in San Antonio. The way he swiftly pulls out Coppini’s 1948 autobiography *From Dawn Until Sunset* to read me a passage makes it seem like he always keeps the book on hand.

But in 1920, all 24 statues went missing from UT records.

“It’s a mystery,” Powell says, adding that every time he meets someone with a UT connection, he asks if they know about the missing art. “I’ve nearly given up, though I continue to be curious. It would be marvelous if any of that gift from Coppini came to life again.”

So when Powell mentioned the “Victims” statue at to Bernardoni, it was a shot in the dark. He never foresaw his lunchtime companion making the search his own personal mission.

“Every bell in my head went off,” Bernardoni says. Though he had never heard of Coppini before his lunch with Powell, he too felt personally connected to the sculptor and the statue—not only did his family emigrate from Italy in the late 1870s, but his great-grandfather had died in the Galveston storm.

After lunch that day, Bernardoni returned to his office, where he runs a booking and production company. He immediately got to work and made the first call in his quest for the missing statues, which he likens to that of Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

“I don’t want to get supernatural here, but why in God’s name, out of the blue, would [Powell] start talking about this?” he says. “That doesn’t just happen by accident. I have to do my best—there’s no other way.”

The Man Behind The Plaster Casts

By the time we meet, about six weeks have passed since Bernardoni's investigation began. He's a man who welcomes seemingly improbable tasks, having led the restoration of Paramount Theatre in the '70s when he was still a student. He's contacted nearly 70 people and organizations, slowly making way through the resources he's gathered in his 47 years in Austin. For every "no" and unanswered call, Bernardoni says he gets just a little more committed. "That's just who I am," he says. "I get tenacious when I'm passionate, and I'm very passionate about this."

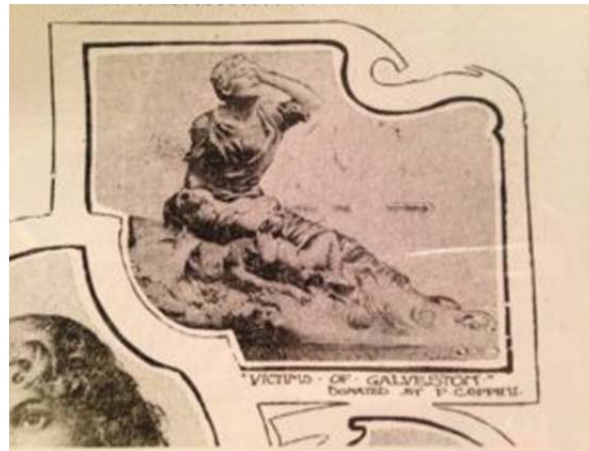
And if Bernardoni knew nothing of Coppini before, that's far from true now. He hired proxy researcher Ralph Elder, BA '71, MLS '74, former assistant director of the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, who quickly became the brain to Bernardoni's brawn. Bernardoni tells me Elder's a "brilliant researcher," the kind who can dig through three times the number of files as anyone else in half the time and has a knack for deciphering century-old handwriting.

All the duo had to start with was a timeline created in 1998 by the only other person to have studied the case of the missing statues: former Galveston Rosenberg Library archivist Shelly Kelly. Together, Bernardoni and Elder have sifted through articles, documents, books, and letters from all around Texas. They're trying to make sense of the events surrounding the loss of the "Victims" statue—which Coppini wrote in his autobiography was "the only one I regret to have been lost."

Coppini was born in a small village in northern Italy in 1870. In a [*Texas Monthly* article from 1984](#), author Stephen Harrigan, BA '70, wrote that Coppini "had come into the world sprinkled with pixie dust," crafting small ceramics by the time he was 10. He moved to the U.S. in 1896, where he wound up working in New York. But when he couldn't find success, he took a job in Texas creating a nine-foot statue of Jefferson Davis as part of a Confederate memorial at the Capitol. "Though I am Italian born, I am American reborn," he once told the [*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*](#).

Coppini began cultivating an impressive reputation as a sculptor throughout Texas. When Galveston was hit with a deadly storm that killed more than 6,000 people, city leaders asked him to build a commemoration in the victims' memory. But, Bernardoni says, when Coppini presented the design for the "Victims" statue, the leaders found it "excruciatingly painful" and ultimately opted out of the commission. Instead of abandoning the project, Coppini felt compelled to move forward. He

constructed the statue and entered it for exhibition at the [St. Louis World Fair in 1904](#)—but once again, the statue missed its chance of national renown.



Some strange twist of fate had resulted in the statue’s crate being labeled as fruit, and it sat unopened. By the time fair organizers noticed, it was too late to exhibit the statue in the main showcase, and it was relegated to a building that featured works solely from Texas. The statue had only been shown once before, when Coppini held a viewing at his home in San Antonio, inviting flood survivors and families of those who drowned.

Then in Feb. 14, 1914, when Coppini was clearing out his studio to move to Chicago, he wrote a letter to the former chairman of the UT Board of Regents, Major George W. Littlefield, stating he wanted to donate the “Victims” statue and 23 more of his own works to the university. “Of course it may be that I will be asked to donate them to some Easter Museum, later on,” he wrote. “But as I feel Texas to be my own State, you shall always have the first opportunity.”

The Trail Runs Cold

Just as WWI began brewing, so did the complicated residency of Coppini’s statues on campus. At the time of his donation, UT campus was significantly smaller than the 400 acres it is today. There was no place to put the heroic statues and busts, so then-UT president Sidney Mezes had them stored in what was then the chemistry building for a short time before allocating them to the basement of Old Main. That’s where students from *Longhorn Magazine* found them still sitting in 1918 and demanded they be put on display.



“He has given the University a princely gift,” their article reads. “It must be admitted that we accorded it but a beggarly reception.” But the students’ call to action did little, and the statues weren’t displayed until Christmastime in 1919.

The 1920 edition of the *Cactus yearbook* ran a four-page feature on Coppini’s gifts, noting that the “Victims” statue was on display in the education building (now known as Sutton Hall) during the holidays. But that’s where the trail runs cold save for one clipping from the *Austin American-Statesman* that briefly mentions someone possibly spotting 10 Coppini sculptures on the third floor of Old Main in 1928.

“To date we’ve just found all these teases that ‘yes, indeed they were here,’” Elder says. “But basically we’ve come up with no smoking gun.”

The Suppositions

How could 24 large statues just go missing with no one taking notice? And what did Coppini have to say about all this?

In 1920, Coppini was busy making plans for the Littlefield Fountain. By the time the monument was dedicated more than a decade later, Littlefield had died and Coppini battled the university over costs and unapproved redesigns of his vision, leaving more than just a sour note in Coppini’s relationship with UT.



Elder says any mention of the missing statues doesn't appear again until 1943, when Waldine Tauch, Coppini's protégé, penned a letter to former UT President Homer Rainey, asking, "Did you find it yet?" But no answer has been found in the files, and as far as Bernardoni and Elder can tell, Coppini died in 1957, never knowing where his statues had gone.

"Then you start the supposition work," Elder says. The duo determined five possibilities as to what could have happened. One: The statues could have been consumed in a fire in the chemistry building in 1927, though that wouldn't explain the *Statesman* article or why Coppini was never given an answer.

Another idea is that they could have been sent to another institution or city. But considering the number of places Bernardoni has contacted, including Baylor University and places in Galveston, it doesn't seem likely.

The third theory is they could be spread around the state, sitting in someone's backyard. "Don't laugh," Bernardoni says. It's happened before that lost items wound up in unusual places, like the [nearly 100 brains that went missing](#) for 20 years in the back of a UT closet.

One of the more probable, and more devastating, possibilities is that the statues were treated carelessly and were simply destroyed after being moved from location to location. Ultimately, they may have been discarded. In a scribbled down memo from 1955, Coppini's friend and longtime director of UT's physical plant Carl Eckhardt mentions that "the university had not properly preserved the donations of these works."

The fifth theory—Bernardoni's most hopeful—is that they're sitting in their crates in a dark corner of a storage room at the J. J. Pickle Research Center. When [Old Main was torn down in the '30s](#), its bricks were individually wrapped and taken to be stored at the center when it was still a magnesium plant. Bernardoni believes the statues could have been shipped there with the bricks and were just forgotten about. He's working toward searching the facilities, though there are more than 100 buildings. To top it off, each one is individually managed, meaning he'd have to go through numerous people to take a look inside each one.

Bernardoni hopes that if someone, somewhere has even the slightest bit of information about Coppini's work that they will contact him. If too much time passes and Bernardoni's investigation remains unsolved, he intends to get the "Victims" sculpture remade, this time in bronze or even marble, and find it a home in Galveston.

"I know this happened a long time ago," Bernardoni says. "But this was a real famous sculptor who gave his heart and his love of Texas. We may never know what happened. But that man deserves an answer."

And so for now, the great Coppini caper continues.

Photos from top:

Texas sculptor Pompeo Coppini poses for a portrait in 1212; Dolph Briscoe Center for American History.

<http://alcalde.texasexes.org/2016/07/the-great-coppini-caper/>