

THE LEGEND OF THE PIASA BIRD

"The numerous and powerful nation called the Illinois, formerly inhabited the state which now bears their name, over the greater portion of which their hunting grounds extended. For very many years they continued to increase in numbers and prosperity, and were deemed the bravest and most warlike of all the tribes of the great valley. At length in the most populous district of their country, near the residence of their greatest chief, there appeared an enormous animal, part beast, part bird which took up its abode on the rock and banquetted daily upon numbers of the people whom it bore off in its enormous talons. It was covered with scales of every possible color and had a huge tail, with a blow of which it could shake the earth; from its head which was like the head of a fox with the beak of an eagle, projected immense horns, and its four feet were armed with powerful claws, in each of which it could carry a buffalo. The flapping of its enormous wings was like the roar of thunder, and when it dived into the river, it threw the waves far up on the land. To this animal they gave the name of the 'Bird of the Pi-as-au,' or the bird of the evil spirit. In vain did the medicine men use all their powers to drive away this fearful visitor. Day by day, the number of their tribe diminished, to feed his insatiate appetite. At last, the young chief of the nation, Wassatogo (Ouatoga), who was beloved by his people, and esteemed their bravest and best warrior, called a council of the priests, in a secret cave, where after fasting for many days, they slept, and the Great Spirit came to the young chief in his sleep, and told him the only way to rid his people of their destroyer, was to offer himself as a sacrifice. Wassatogo started with joy, and arousing the slumbering priests, informed them of what had occurred to him, and his determination to make the sacrifice required. He then assembled the tribe and made a speech, recounting his deeds of valor, acquainting them of his dream, and exhorting them, like him to be ever ready to die for their people. Wassatogo then dressed himself in his chieftain's garb, put on his war paint, as if going to battle, and taking his bow, arrows, and tomahawk, he placed himself on a prominent point of the rock, to await the coming of the monster-bird. Meanwhile, as he had been directed in his vision, a band of his best braves had been concealed in the interstices of the rock, each with his arrow drawn to the head waiting the moment when their chief should be attacked, to wreak their last vengeance on the enemy. High and erect the bold Wassatogo stood, chanting his death dirge, with a calm and placid countenance, when suddenly there came a roar as of awful thunder, and in an instant the Bird of the Pias-sau, uttering a wild scream that shook the hills, darted upon and seized the chieftain in his talons, at that moment, Wassatogo dealt it a blow in the head with his tomahawk, and his braves let fly their arrows from the ambush, and the unwieldy carcass of the bird rolled down the cliff while the chieftain remained unhurt. The tribe now gave way to the wildest joy, and held a great feast in honor of the event, and to commemorate it, painted the figure of the bird on the side of the rock on whose summit Wassatogo had stood, and there it has endured for ages as a mark for the arrow or bullet of every red man who has since passed it ascending or descending the great father of waters."

THE PIASAU ROCK

"The Piasau, or Pi-as-sau Rock, is situated on the northern confines of the city of Alton, immediately on the Mississippi, from the surface of which it rises to a height of nearly an hundred feet, including a receding base of broken and shelving rock, extending about thirty feet from the water's edge, and about the same distance in height. Its summit is sparsely studded with dwarf cedars, and it presents a craggy and jagged front, with the exception of a space of about fifty feet by forty, which is smooth and even. On this space is emblazoned the figure of a hybridous animal, having a head resembling that of a fox, from which protrude large horns or antlers; its back is supplied with wings, and it has a long curling tail, and four feet, or rather four huge claws. The sketch of the figure is very rough and evidently executed by no master hand. It seems to have been first drawn with a species of red paint, and afterwards rubbed over and polished with lime or some other white substance. . . . The Piasau Rock is the lower extremity of the bluffs which commencing at Alton, extend northward up the Mississippi. It has been marked, as we have described "from time whereof the

memory of man runneth not to the contrary," and what is most remarkable, the tradition connected with it, is not confined to a few tribes of Indians only, but seems to exist among all the aboriginal inhabitants of the Great West, none of whom, even to this day, pass the rock without discharging their arrows or rifles at the figures, upon and around which are innumerable marks of balls and other missiles."

The above legend and description of the Piasa Rock are taken from the publication "The Valley of the Mississippi," "a series of views embracing pictures of the . . . remarkable and picturesque scenery on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers." The pictures were drawn and lithographed by J. C. Wild, edited by Lewis F. Thomas, and published by J. C. Wild, at the Republican Printing Office, St. Louis, November 5, 1841. The original work is now the possession of the State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia; copy No. 202 of a limited edition of reprints of the original, published by Joseph Garnier in St. Louis in 1948, is in the Rare Book Room, of the University of Illinois. A photograph of the original was secured for us by Mr. William Brunner of the Alton (Illinois) Evening Telegraph.

WHICH PIASA BIRD?

We have wanted to do a wood block print of the Piasa Bird for some time, but our problem was increasingly complicated by the question, "which Piasa Bird?" We have copies of six different versions of this legendary bird, and there seems to be some evidence favoring the validity of each one.

Father Marquette in his writings published in Paris in 1681, mentions in his description of reaching the Mississippi River in 1673: "As we were descending the river, we saw high rocks with hideous monsters painted on them . . . they are as large as a calf, with head and horns like a goat, their eyes are red, beard like a tigers, and a face like a man . . . they are painted red, green, and black." Father Hennepin, in 1698, described the beast as "painted with the red colors of the savage." The Hon. P. A. Armstrong of Morris, Illinois, published a pamphlet in 1887, "The Piasa, or the Devil Among the Indians," in which he mentions having inspected two large petroglyphs on a cliff near Alton, "incised or cut on a layer of blue-gray sandstone . . . twelve feet high, and thirty feet long." Henry Lee Stoddard in the April, 1927, issue of the Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society published a copy of Mr. Wild's version, without credit, also a much more elaborate a detailed version, clearly in conflict with the "Wild" version. The Hon. Armstrong also published the detailed figure, also without credit to any one else. The first volume of the Illinois Centennial History published by the State in 1917, publishes as its frontispiece, a plate in color, "The Piasau Rock Near Alton" from Lewis "Das illustrierte Mississippithal (1858?)" which is clearly a copy of the sketch and lithograph by Mr. Wild. To add to the confusion, and it should be mentioned that the original Piasa Rock was blasted away in 1870 to clear the right of way for a new highway, a restoration of the Piasa Bird has been placed on the bluff at Alton, at the Alton end of the McAdams Memorial Highway, and this restoration follows the pattern of the more elaborate and detailed version of the Bird.

At any rate, with the help of Mr. Brunner and Mr. Eddie Jacquin of Alton, some materials provided by Mr. Francis Koenig of Urbana, and materials found in the University of Illinois branch of the Illinois State Historical Society, we are standing by the Wild version of the Piasa Bird, and that is the one reproduced in the wood block print.

The style of the type is taken from the hand written and printed text of the Constitution of the State of Illinois written in 1818.

The prints were made by hand from wood blocks, the wood being more of the old tulip wood taken from the Trustee's Room of University Hall which stood on the campus of the University of Illinois, (the supply being nearly exhausted), and the printing was done by hand by the Japanese method.

FRED AND BETTY TURNER

Urbana
Christmas
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