

Missing in Texarkana: One 30-foot-tall Indian carving



TEXARKANA TRAVEL INFORMATION CENTER

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TEXARKANA — It seems like a hard thing to lose: a stately, 30-foot-tall wooden American Indian head capped by an elaborate headdress, his hair framing a weathered but regal visage.

But no one knows exactly what happened to the statue that, until 20 years ago, stood sentry in front of the Texas Travel Information Center on Interstate 30 in Texarkana.

The bust was the creation of sculptor Peter Wolf Toth. It was part of Toth's Trail of the Whispering Giants, a series of more than 50 pieces the artist created across the country. He placed at least one in each state to memorialize the plight of the American Indian.

The Texarkana statue, badly deteriorated by years of exposure weather and water, was removed in 1990; its empty pedestal followed years later.

"We made every effort we could to maintain it and to get it repaired, but there was really just no one with the skill to repair it," said Stuart Daniels , then-vice president of the Texarkana Chamber of Commerce.

It was taken to Four States Fairgrounds while the resources could be marshaled to fix it. It was meant to be a temporary resting place, but it remained there for the better part of a decade.

Ralph Shoptaw , former executive director of the Fair Association, says he is pretty sure it was there when he left Texarkana in 1997. But it definitely wasn't there when association Vice President Lisa Barr joined the staff in 1998.

"It's one of the things that if you saw it, you'd remember," Barr said.

She was told that the effigy had been kept in the shop until the mid- to late 1990s, when a pair of movers took it away.

More than a decade later, the worker didn't remember who the movers were or where they took the statue.

That seems to be the last time the statue was seen in Texarkana.

Not that it's been forgotten.

Toth's Trail of the Whispering Giants, which includes statues in Little Rock, Ark., and Broken Bow, Okla., has become something of a cult phenomenon. Enthusiasts follow the trail, checking locations off a list as they go.

The Texarkana piece is on many older lists, and visitors arrive expecting to see the statue. A manila folder containing a photograph of the statue, a 1990 letter announcing its removal and a Texarkana Gazette clipping detailing its plight is as close as they come.

"We do occasionally still have people come in and want to know, 'Where's the big Indian?'" said Linda Vaughn, a supervisor at the travel information center. "That's what they call it: 'the big Indian.'"