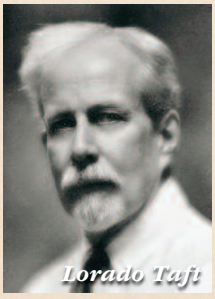
A testament to the ages, Lorado Taft's sculpture continues to "ope

# Weathering the

Story and Photos By
Rachel Wolfe

Lowden State Park in Oregon, Illinois, is home to one of the greatest feats of artistic and industrial achievement. This year, the Indian statue celebrates its 100th year of overlooking the Rock River Valley. Standing proud at nearly 50 feet tall atop a 250-foot bluff, the statue has endured it all. Withstanding wind, drought, earthquakes, blizzards and downpours, the iconic Indian sculpture, often referred to as Black Hawk or The Eternal Indian, has become more than a landmark; it has become a testament to the will of man and the majesty of nature.

The Indian statue stands as a symbol for the spirit of the Native Americans and the appreciation of natural beauty. Created by Lorado Taft, a prominent sculptor during the late 1800s and early 1900s, the statue was intended as a monument to the beauty of the land and the history it holds. Taft not only was a sculptor but also an adamant educator of the beauty in the natural world. His passion to share his appreciation for daily life and his artistic visions with the world began in his downtown studio, in Chicago's Fine Art Building.



(Photo courtesy Ted Hild)

n the eyes to the awe."

# Wind

**Lorado Taft's Eternal Indian statue has been an iconic Rock River landmark since its July 1, 1911 dedication.**

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

During the warmer months, Taft and his fellow artists would travel to Oregon to find reprieve from the city heat and inspiration for their work. The open spaces of the river valley relieved the artists of the stress of city life and became a haven for creativity. The Eagle's Nest was then created, and Taft made Oregon his second home.

Having made a name for himself as a sculptor in Chicago, Taft was determined to leave his mark on the river valley. After completing the Public Library project, Taft wanted to build something to honor the indomitable spirit of Native Americans. He wanted to share the story of the land, and the legacy of the American Indian. Taft sketched a form that would represent the code of honor the natives lived by, to protect and cherish the land with the belief anything of real value can never be taken. The Indian statue stands today, not just as a visual representation of all Native Americans, but as the figurehead Taft hoped would symbolize the ideals of times past and future.

Ground breaking took place in 1909 and Taft's vision was to construct the statue out of concrete, making him the first to use the material as an artistic medium. Construction of the concrete sculpture was funded by generous contributions from J.P. Beck, Wallace Heckman and land donated by Frank Lowden. In 1907, Taft formed a partnership with John Prasuhn, whose concrete working experience and engineering expertise would soon be put to the test. An earthquake and windstorm ruined the beginnings of the statue. Not to be discouraged, Taft and Prasuhn decided to reinforce the piece-mold technique with steel beams. In addition to the steel and concrete, a stronger, 18-foot base was poured, extending 12 feet below ground and 6 feet above.

**Employing new technologies to construct the statue, Lorado Taft became the first artist to use concrete as a sculpture medium.**

**Standing 50 feet tall atop a 250-foot bluff, the statue is visible from several vantage points along the Rock River.**

Construction of the statue itself didn't start until 1910. The needed technology was scarce in those days. Two crews of 14 men each were hired to work at $5 an hour and for 12-hour shifts. Facing brutal seasonal changes, the men persevered, pumping 700 gallons of water an hour. The wood-heated water was sent up the 220-foot bluff where the concrete was mixed at the base of the statue.

(Photo courtesy Ted Hild.)

(Photo courtesy Ted Hild.)

Completion of the statue required more than 65,000 gallons of water, 412 barrels of raw Portland cement, two tons of twisted steel rebar, 20 tons of red granite screenings (adding considerable weight to the concrete) and 200 yards of burlap. The finished Indian statue and base weigh in around 100 tons.

Dedication of the monumental statue took place on July 1, 1911. On a scorching hot day, speakers, poets and artists gathered at The Eagles Nest Colony to honor the statue as a symbol of remembrance to the natives that walked the land before us. Taft hoped the unveiling would help heal old wounds and "conceive a future rich in hope for acceptance of our neighbors."

**In addition to drawing visitors interested in the statue, Lowden State Park is a popular picnic and camping destination.**

**The Lowden State Park statue was entered into the National Register of Historic Places on Nov. 5, 2009.**

Since its dedication, the statue has continued to weather the winds of time, standing watch over technical revolutions and social change. The Indian statue has endured several earthquakes, the most recent having reached a magnitude of 4.0 on Feb. 10, 2010. Minimal restoration and repairs have been needed over the years. The most notable repairs coincided with the 75th anniversary of the statue when recognizable chalk-like, white trails and spalling caused by the calcification of minerals were repaired with an epoxy compound, filling the cracks and spaces in drilled holes. At that time, a canvas rubber mold was taken of the chest and arms for foreseeable future restoration efforts. The statue's improved appearance was unveiled to the public in 1991.

The statue continues to inspire others, including being entered in the National Register of Historic Places on Nov. 5, 2009, and inclusion in the March 2010 mural for the Lincoln Highway Coalition project at 103 W. Washington, Oregon, Illinois. The figure proudly stands as a figurehead to the Lowden State Park and Lorado Taft Field Campus, which offer seasonal recreation for residents and travelers, and provides outdoor education through Northern Illinois University. One of the original 49-inch models of the statue still stands in the Oregon Public Library today. Currently, the State of Illinois is heading the collection of funds for repair and maintenance to carry the statue into its second century.

The Indian statue was erected over a decade of planning, engineering and hard work. Remains of the worksite are scarce today, but it's easy to see the effort and passion that went into creating the first concrete sculpture and second-largest figure of its kind. As a guardian of the land with a strong historical significance, the commitment of the surrounding community reaches to all people across the nation.

Taft's mission help others "open eyes to the awe" successfully joined people together to share in the glory of his artistic visions. Standing together with the land, history and Lorado Taft, we have a monument to withstand the winds of time and stand as a true testament not only to the Native Americans, but also to the strength of the human spirit.

Rachel Wolfe is a freelance writer residing in Oregon, Illinois.