

The CIGAR STORE INDIAN STAGES a COMEBACK



Cigar store doormen sometimes won civic fame. This bandmaster was voted first citizen of Coldwater, Mich.

By Emily C. Davis

AMERICANS who can recall life before the jazz age may admit remembering the wooden Indian era. In those days, they can tell you, wooden Indians stood around quite ignored by science. They were just familiar figures on Main Street.

Almost every cigar store that could afford it had a silent Injun Chief or an Indian Maid—Pocahontas, of course—outside the shop door to welcome the customers. Pocahontas with a bunch of wooden cigars in her hand was the first cigaret girl.

Those Indians held doorman jobs for about 200 years, and had their widest employment around 1850 to 1880. Then came the Wooden Indian depression era. Fewer and fewer were seen.

But now the wooden Indians have staged a comeback in the public eye, with a new kind of dignity. They are hailed as interesting and historic objects from an earlier American era. They are classed as art antiquities.

The Works Progress Administration is one group that is gathering wooden Indian data. As American folk art, cigar store Indians are included in the Index of American Design which the WPA is busily compiling. For years, Americans laughed at the wooden Indian school of art. Now it turns out that many of these quaint carvings are not so bad, after all. Looked upon as folk art, they rate as "works made in this country of good and significant design."

The index will provide for the first time a panorama of American design in a big portfolio illustrated with 7000 plates. The portfolio shows decorative designs found on American toys and textiles, old Southwestern spurs and old Philadelphia highboys, figureheads carved for sailing ships—and cigar store Indians in all their finery of tobacco-leaf skirts and fancy feathers.

In a quest for Indians worthy to il-

lustrate our good folk art, the WPA artists struck their best hunting ground in Grand Rapids, Mich. There, Dudley A. Waters owns a collection of 41 figures, rated as the biggest and most famous gathering of wooden Indians in America.

"Wooden Indians" describes the collection briefly, for want of a better short name. But not all the statues are Indians, and not all are wooden.

IN the latter part of the 19th century, some cigar store figures were cast in metal. And then, too, there were some people who wanted to be different, and so they ordered some other kind of wooden figure, not an Indian, carved for a sign.

These novelty seekers would order a long-bearded wooden Turk, or a Sir Walter Raleigh, or an Uncle Sam or a Goddess of Liberty. One dealer welcomed customers himself, by having his own portrait figure carved in wood, all dressed up in the uniform of the military company he belonged to.

Cigar store figures won civic fame. One wooden bandmaster was voted the first citizen of Coldwater, Mich., when the townsfolk warred over priority of far

It is easy to understand why Americans have taken cigar store art lightly, particularly the Indian figures. At first glance, a wooden Indian is likely to remind you of a puzzle—the kind labeled "what's wrong with this picture?"

You look up at the headdress, and instead of the stiff feathers from an eagle or hawk that an Indian would have stuck there, you may find a wooden Indian nonchalantly wearing droopy, curling feathers. It looks queer, and a little foolish.

There must be a reason for those feathers. Perhaps it can be traced to the Pocahontas influence. Remember



The man holds two "Dr. Pattersons" (Gods of Medicine) from Panama. One of the beak-nosed figures is shown in larger size at the left.

Indian Princess Pocahontas was carried to England and received at court, after she married John Rolfe. Her portraits show her in formal attire, holding an ostrich feather fan. So, when honest woodcarvers tackled a Pocahontas job, they may have been awed into giving her plumes instead of Indian feathers for her hair.

From the headdress, your eye wanders critically over the wooden Indian's costume, and you wonder why he, or

she, is so bundled in clothes. The tobacco-leaf skirt, so often worn by these figures, is a good advertising idea. But why a knee-length petticoat under the grass skirt? And some Pocahontases even have laced-in waists like something out of Godey's Lady's Book. It is most un-Indian.

There's a reason for everything. And the over-dressed cigar store Indian girls doubtless were considered pretty daring in their day, with knees showing, and right on the street, too. Early colonists got used to seeing redskins in their native costumes which were often



Once in a while the statue whittlers carved a fine, fat Turk such as this one.

scant. But later city-bred Americans weren't used to it. Don't forget the chief vogue of the wooden Indian was in the Victorian era.

Their origin goes back to the days when Pocahontas herself was alive, according to some historians of the wooden Indian tribe. That was in James the First's reign, and apothecary shops sold the American tobacco in England.

To mark the counter where tobacco was sold, they set up a sign, in the usual English fashion of contriving some sort of sign for each important line of goods. The baker's sign was a sheaf of wheat outside his door. The cutler had a pair of shears for a sign. The tobacco sign at first was a Negro boy clad in a tobacco-leaf kilt, possibly because the British confused Indians who smoked tobacco with Negroes who raised it in Virginia. Or possibly, these woodcarvers knew too little about Indians to make any better portraits.

In America, there was no such confusion. Indians were well known to be the first people to smoke tobacco, and the ones who introduced the weed to white men. So Indians became the prevailing cigar ads.

While white men carved Indians, the



The girl Indians were given petticoats so that they wouldn't shock Victorians.

Indians were carving white men from wood, and making them look just as quaint as the red men in front of cigar stores. Not that the Indians were trying to get even. Nor did they want to imitate the white man's notions of shopkeeping. They were not turning out wooden white men to advertise guns, glass beads, or saddles. The wooden white men served in magic, or to further the social ambitions of some red man or his wife.

Scientific explorers have brought to light some of these wooden white men, found during visits to remote tribes, thereby shedding light on what white men look like to Indians, as subjects for art.

CURIOUS Indian staffs, now in the U. S. National Museum at Washington, D. C., are carved at the top with the portrait of an unmistakable Scotsman. These staffs have been prized possessions of Indian medicine men in jungles of northern South America and Panama.

And the Scot is not merely a white man, but is a likeness of Dr. William Patterson, who lived in Panama about 1700.

So marvelous were the cures wrought by this doctor, in Indian estimation, that they made him their god of medicine. His cult is still growing, spreading through a wide region of the tropics. An Indian medicine man who has a wooden image of Dr. Patterson can consult with his departed Scottish colleague and get expert help in treating patients, so these Indians believe.

The best Indian carvers have been remarkably careful in costuming Dr. Patterson.

Whatever the costume, though, there is no mistaking the sharp, long-nosed profile of this character. The least skillful Indian carver gets the beaklike nose, even if he fails even to attempt European costumes. The most skillful attain a clever portrait, surprisingly correct in almost every detail.

Nowadays, the doctor may be portrayed riding an airplane for speed. One of these toylike carvings has two long-nosed figures flying in acrobat style on the wings of the plane. After all, if one Dr. Patterson is good in magic, two Dr. Pattersons ought to be unbeatable.