

Donation of the Month

Object: Billiken Doll
Catalog #: 1992.16.1
Donor: Earl C. Rockwood, Jr.



For a few years he was all the rage, capturing hearts across the nation and around the world, a guy whose identity was adapted and adopted by various communities and cultures. Who was this mystery man? Billiken, that's who!

Billiken was "born" in Kansas City, Missouri, in the mind of Florence Pretz. An art teacher and illustrator, Pretz created a chubby, pointy-headed, imp-faced creature, patterning him after the Chinese god Joss, the god of "things as they ought to be." It's possible that Pretz was also influenced by a line in Rudyard Kipling's 1892 poem, "When Earth's Last Picture is Painted," which reads "...and each, in his separate star, Shall draw the Thing as he sees It for the God of Things as They Are!"

After receiving patent number 39,603 in 1908 for her "new, original, and ornamental Design for Images," Pretz found a manufacturer for her creature in the Billiken Company of Chicago, which lent its name to her creation.

In 1909 Billiken made his debut in the form of banks and statues. Sensing a sure thing, the company quickly produced stuffed dolls, selling over 200,000 in the first six months of production. Billiken was one of the first copyrighted dolls ever made.

The doll in the Museum's collection, which dates to about 1909-12, is a little down on his luck. Although the pink paint on his face is flaking, bits of cork are spilling out of the tears in his hands and feet, and the fur on his mohair body is mostly gone, he still bears his trademark mischievous grin. On his chest is a green fabric label which depicts an image of him surrounded by a horseshoe. The label is stamped "U 8" which may denote a manufacturing date. The doll was donated by Earl C. Rockwood, Jr.; Billiken was a

highly prized friend of his mother, Dorothy McCall Rockwood, of Butler County, Pennsylvania.

As "Billimania" swept the nation, Billiken's image was fashioned into a multitude of other products, including pickle forks, watchfobs, marshmallow candies, toothpick holders, bookends, and salt-and-pepper shakers. He was even celebrated in such songs such the "Billiken Rag" and the "Billiken Man Song." E. Ray Goetz, who wrote the lyric for the latter tune, came up with a fanciful reason to explain why Billiken is always depicted in a seated position:

*Once a fat man went a-swimmin, (Where?)
From the surf he tripped,
He was flirtin' with some woman, (When?)
When his new suit ripped.
As he sat down in the sand,
He said, "Billikens don't stand."
(Why?) I'm a Billiken Man, (Oh!) a Billiken Man.*

Billiken was all about luck and good fortune. A 1908 pocket token featured the following verse: "I am the God of Luckiness, so always keep me nigh.

Misfortune's frown will disappear, at one flash from my eye. Be sure that I am on the spot, when projects you begin. I am the God of Luckiness, my name is Billiken." It was believed that to buy a Billiken gave the buyer luck while being given one was better luck. But oddly enough, the best luck of all was having one *stolen* from you.

But Billiken's luck was soon over. By 1912 most folks had moved on to the next fad. But he's not the Billiken man for nothing. During his brief popularity he managed to influence a number of communities and cultures around the world, an influence that continues today.

To help publicize the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in 1909, the Times Publishing Company of Seattle distributed small Billiken figurines. A storekeeper from Diomed Island, Alaska, got one of the figures and gave it to famous Eskimo carver Angokwaghuk, who was also known by the nickname "Happy Jack." Using traditional native materials such as fossilized whale teeth he created a simplified version of Billiken's smiling face. Billiken's new look was so popular that Angokwaghuk and other native artists made him part of their repertoire, where he remains today.

Billiken's popularity at St. Louis University in Missouri is due to two St. Louis sportswriters. How this came about is still debated, but one version of the story recounts that during a 1910 or 1911 football practice session, newspaperman William O'Connor, upon noticing SLU coach John Bender's squinty eyes and broad grin, exclaimed, "Why Bender's a regular Billiken!" That afternoon Charles Z. McNamara took up the notion and drew a cartoon of Bender in Billiken's likeness and posted it in an area drugstore. Soon the football team became known as Bender's Billikens. The nickname stuck and since then SLU teams have gone by the moniker of the "Billikens." There's even a Billiken-headed mascot.

As in America, Billiken fever initially swept through Japan about 1910. He proved so popular that a statue and shrine was built for "Piriken San" in the Shinsekai entertainment district in Osaka to give visitors a chance to create their own good fortune by placing a coin in a box, rubbing the soles of Billiken's feet, and making a wish. After the park closed in 1923 Billiken went missing. When the park was renovated in 1980 the statue was recreated from old photos. Since then a new wave of Billimania has swept over Japan. In the 1990s an acclaimed toy collector spoke about Billiken on a national show and started a new craze for the creature. Billiken's fame was further enhanced by a 1996 movie. In it the statue of Billiken comes to life, fulfilling wishes and thwarting a real-estate developer's plan to drastically renovate the Shinsekai district to make way for the Olympics.

Billiken had some influence in Chicago as well. In the mid-1920s a 13-year-old boy began writing a column for the African-American newspaper, the *Chicago Weekly Defender*. Young Willard Motley wrote children's stories and entertaining pieces under the pen name "Bud Billiken," a name surely influenced by

the popular toy made in his hometown. As the feature caught on the name became attached to the youngsters who sold the newspaper on the street. Soon a cartoon featuring mischievous newsboy Bud Billiken followed, along with a picnic sponsored by the paper's founder to thank his newsboys. The picnic grew into the Bud Billiken Parade which still winds its way every August through the streets of south Chicago. Motley's later writings focused on racial pride and social awareness, issues which are celebrated in this, the largest African-American parade in the nation. And the parade's mascot? Well, he's a certain squat, mythical, comical creature, that's who.

CREDITS

"Billiken" in *The Knopf Collectors' Guides to American Antiques: Dolls* , 1983; "The New World and the Reaching Heaven Tour" on www.geocities.jp/general_sasaki/Shinsekai-and-tsuutenkaku.html ; "Origin of the Billiken" on www.eas.slu.edu/People/BJMitchell/lbill.html ; "Billiken" on www.e-z-smith.com/Billycan/ ; "Billiken" on www.jmbgalleries.com/native/sculpt/billiken.htm; "Chicago Songs" on www.chipublib.org/008subject/001artmusic/chgosongs/chicagosongs.html ; "Willard Motley" on www.niulib.niu.edu/rbsc/2wm2.html ; "Joyner Marks a Century of Black Progress" by Keli Worley in the *Chicago Reporter* , Dec 1993 (www.chicagoreporter.com/1993/12-93/1293JoynerMarksaCenturyofBlackProgress.htm); Florence Pretz's patent application on www.uspto.gov/patft/index.html ; and "Salute to Pioneering Artists of Color, Pioneer Cartoon Gallery 5" by Tim Jackson on www.clstoons.com/paoc/gallery/comix5.htm#anchor15070