



NEW ENGLAND: JIGSAW PUZZLE, WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS.

Elyse: We headed north for our next investigation, and ended up 30 miles outside Boston in Worcester, Massachusetts. Is the image on this early 20th-century jigsaw puzzle fact or fantasy? In a time when most women couldn't vote, would they really have been playing a rough contact sport? It's a mystery that's intrigued the jigsaw's owner, Bob Armstrong. Bob is passionate about antique jigsaws. Most people throw a puzzle away when a piece is missing, but not Bob. He'll fix old jigsaws and restore them back to life.

Bob Armstrong: When I acquire a puzzle and work on it, I put so much time, energy, passion into it. Essentially, I fall in love with many of these great old puzzles, particularly if they're well cut. There's one puzzle in my collection which particularly puzzles me.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan, and Elyse Luray and I are beginning our investigation at Bob's home in Worcester, Massachusetts. Where'd you find a puzzle like this?

Bob: In January, 1998, I went to a paper or collectible show and there was this box. Brought it home and couple days later assembled this puzzle, and was stunned at what I saw. It shows women playing rugby football. I think that's rugby football. There's a big round ball, there's two teams of women, and it's signed by an artist over here: "Granville smith, 1894." And did women play a contact sport like rugby or football in 1894? Well, I'd like to know more about what's behind this startling image.

Elyse: While Wes heads off to Boston to investigate the story behind this extraordinary image, I've come to Maine to find out more about the puzzle. Ann Williams is a world-renowned jigsaw expert. She'll be able to tell me about the history of the jigsaw puzzle and take me back to a time when these puzzles were meant for adults.

Ann Williams: This is the story of the sick child who made it through the night, and it's called "Joy cometh in the morning". This was made by Parker Brothers. You've probably heard of them because they're famous for making Monopoly. In 1908 and 1909, they shut down their factory. They made no games; they made only puzzles that year. And this is an example of one of my favorite puzzles from the Depression. It's so tightly interlocking that you can pick it up and turn it over and not a single piece will fall out.

Elyse: Unbelievable!

Ann: This comes from Colorado.

Elyse: In its original box?

Ann: In its original box. It's called the original bull puzzle.

Elyse: Should I be scared?

Ann: To help you getting it together and I'll just take out my little catalog sheet here...that is [laughter] well, it's just a dried-up cow patty. [laughter]

Elyse: Did you put it together?

Ann: Yes, I did, I did.

Elyse: You touched it?

Ann: I think it may have a little bit of shellac on it. It's quite dry, it doesn't smell.

Elyse: That is wild.

Ann: It is disintegrating though.

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Elyse: That is so funny.

Ann: Well, that's actually the most unusual puzzle.

Elyse: I was not expecting that. So where does Bob's puzzle fit in? Okay, Ann, I need information. What can you tell me about this puzzle?

Ann: It's totally non-interlocking. If we dropped this, we'd be in big trouble. It's cut to some extent on the color lines right around the costumes of the women. The wood is -- it's a plywood, but it's a rather early plywood with a thick center layer. I think it's a classic example of a 1908, 1909 puzzle. Is that the box for the puzzle?

Elyse: This is the box and first, there's no picture, which I was fascinated with, because -- how do you put together a puzzle if there's no picture?

Ann: Well, that's why it's a puzzle.

[laughter]

Elyse: Now the box says, "Sold by M.E. Underwood." does that mean anything to you?

Ann: I have seen one other puzzle by Underwood.

Elyse: You have?

Ann: Yes.

Elyse: Interesting.

Ann: It was Mary E. Underwood.

Elyse: So the "M" stands for Mary? Fantastic! I didn't even think of that. I saw the puzzle and I saw sports, so I automatically thought a man made the puzzle. Never expected a "Mary" that's great to know.

Ann: Actually, in this period, I would say that women predominated as puzzle cutters. Some men cut puzzles, too, of course, but it was mainly women who were cutting puzzles.

Elyse: So Ann thinks Mary Underwood made the puzzle in 1908 or 1909, but why would she have chosen this extraordinary image of women playing football for her jigsaw? I'd like to think she's making a point about women's rights. I want to find out what was happening in New England in the early 1900s in terms of women's suffrage. It says here that Massachusetts, far from being a leading light, was one of the last states to give women the vote and they only got the vote in 1920. I wonder if Mary had strong feelings about the lack of women's rights at this time. Could the image of women playing a man's game be feminist propaganda?

Wes: Never mind Mary's motivation. I'm interested in the picture. Is it fact or fantasy? I've come to meet sports historian professor Alan Gutman to find out if women were playing football in the early 1900s. Do you think the game depicted here is fact or fantasy?

Alan Gutman: I've never seen any evidence of women playing either American football or rugby in this period. What I think most people don't understand is that this was a period in which upper middle-class women did a lot of different sports. They played golf; they played tennis, but not violent team sports. Football was even rougher than rugby. People were killed. Quite a number of college students were killed each season towards the turn of the century.

Wes: You're kidding me!

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Alan: It was a very, very violent game.

Wes: So what you're telling me is that this image is totally fantasy.

Alan: It's very like another image, which is definitely a fantasy, unquestionably a fantasy. It's a drawing by Charles Dana Gibson from 1896, just two years after this painting. I've got a -- I've got a -- I've got a copy. There we are.

Wes: Oh, yeah, look at that.

Alan: Now, you see, they're wearing the leather pants, leather jacket just like the Yale fellow.

Wes: And Yale vs. Vassar? No way.

Alan: Yeah, absolutely. And it's very rough-looking.

Wes: It's extremely rough-looking.

Alan: And you can see this fellow here who is carrying the ball, one sleeve has been torn off. And this woman is about to tackle him.

Wes: He looks frightened.

Alan: Yeah, he really does.

Wes: So the image is of a fantasy game that women wouldn't have been playing, but why? What was the point of it? The artist is definitely Walter Granville Smith. Maybe I can get an idea of why he painted the image from Rich West, an expert in turn-of-the-century magazines. Rich, I brought an illustration by Walter Granville Smith that's been turned into a jigsaw puzzle, hoping that you have seen this image before, that you can maybe tell us something about it.

Rich West: It's a great image. This is very typical of the work that he did for "Truth" magazine in the 1890s.

Wes: I'm not familiar with "Truth" magazine.

Rich: It was a dominant 1890s publication. They called themselves "the handsomest illustrated magazine in the world."

Wes: Oh, great!

Rich: And this is an example, I think, of why it could rightly claim that title.

Wes: So, Rich, have you seen this particular image in "Truth?"

Rich: It's vaguely familiar to me. I may have seen it before, but I can't really place it.

Wes: So what exactly would this have looked like in the magazine?

Rich: Well, I'm sure they had the name "Truth" up at the top that's been trimmed off and there most certainly was a caption on the bottom that's been lost.

Wes: Really?

Rich: It's very rare to find any 1890s artwork where the editor couldn't resist putting in a tag line.

Wes: The box that he has the puzzle in has a label on it that's titled "best of the season." If we can see the original and see what the caption is to see if it really is "best of the season," he's going to love that.

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Rich: Yeah, I suspect it's not because the artist supplied these beautiful drawings, but the editors supplied the captions, and my guess is it's probably wittier than that.

Wes: Do you have any copies of "Truth?"

Rich: Yes.

Wes: Can we take a look at some?

Rich: Sure, let's go.

Wes: Okay, great.

Rich: So there's a woman on the cover.

Wes: That's unusual, isn't it?

Rich: Yes, especially this early. Of course, after the turn of the century, every magazine in America had a woman on the cover, but at this time, it was an unusual thing.

Wes: How racy was this?

Rich: There were a lot of libraries that refused to subscribe to a magazine like "Truth" because it was not appropriate family reading matter. Oh, here's a Granville Smith cover.

Wes: Oh, sure, look at that.

Rich: And again, the same sort of thing, the women on the cover -- in bathing suits. Not very revealing, but it's certainly in kind of luxurious poses. Oh, this classic, behind the scenes at the theater, an opportunity to show women in tights. Look at the great caption: "waiting in the green room for the green ones".

Wes: Oh, that's just unbelievably great. Obviously Walter Granville Smith liked to titillate his audience, but did Mary realize she was choosing a risqué image for her jigsaw?

Elyse: I've come to Boston to where Mary was living when she cut the puzzle. I prefer to think that she was a suffragist who made puzzles with a political message. To find out more about her, I'm going through the city directories with archivist Susan Porter.

Susan Porter: So we're going to look under "Underwood," and you can see, there are a lot of Underwoods.

Elyse: Wow, there's so many Underwoods. And there she is, "Mary E."

Susan: Yeah, "526 Newberry,".

Elyse: Matches perfectly.

Susan: Yes, "Mary E., manicure."

Elyse: A manicurist?

Susan: She's a manicurist.

Elyse: A manicurist, I would never have thought a manicurist. I didn't even know they had manicurists back then. As a

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manicurist, Mary must have been good with her hands, a vital skill when cutting intricate jigsaws. Okay, what do we have here?

Susan: Okay, this is the 1920 Census. We know that she was in Boston in 1920.

Elyse: Right.

Susan: And as you can see, there are a whole bunch of people who live at 526 Newberry Street, so this is a multi-family dwelling.

Elyse: Like an apartment house?

Susan: Like an apartment house.

Elyse: Makes sense.

Susan: And if we look down the list of people, we see at the bottom of this page, "Mary E. Underwood." There she is. And she's living with "Sarah R. Beamus," who is her aunt.

Elyse: "S" stands for single.

Susan: "S" stands for single.

Elyse: So in 1920, she was 43 years old and she was single. Is that a little unusual for that time period?

Susan: It was absolutely not unusual at all. There were more women than men in New England, and so lots of young women didn't marry. And then we move across the page and we can star -- and we get to the category of "occupation." So she's a manicurist for private families, and her aunt was not working. We can assume that she was supporting her aunt.

Elyse: So Mary was a hardworking woman who still found time to cut beautiful puzzles on the side. Sounds like the perfect prototype for today's liberated woman.

Wes: Out of the blue, I got a cryptic call from "Truth" magazine expert, Rich West. He told me to get over to his office as soon as I could. He'd made a big discovery that he needed to share with me. Hey, Rich, how are you?

Rich: Good.

Wes: What's going on?

Rich: Well, I've got something very exciting to show you.

Wes: Oh, great!

Rich: I found what we were looking for.

Wes: Oh, you're kidding me.

Rich: Here it is, the football number of "Truth." Isn't it a beautiful cover?

Wes: It's unbelievably beautiful. Look at that.

Rich: And here's what we have.

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Wes: Oh, my gosh! Look at that! There it is!

Rich: There it is.

Wes: It's the centerfold! It's got a title. Look at this. "Football is such good form, you know." Ah! the double entendre there, i guess, is just wonderful.

Rich: Isn't it great?

Wes: What do you think that would have meant to somebody in 1894?

Rich: Well, it would have been an eyeful.

Wes: Yeah, i guess so. Wow!

Rich: Mary could have seen the image in "Truth" magazine.

Wes: She probably ordered a lithograph of it, which she would have glued to a piece of plywood, ready for cutting. We think she was a part-time puzzle maker who would have done all the work herself.

Elyse: So the image on Bob's puzzle was originally painted by Walter Granville Smith as a risqué centerfold for "Truth" magazine. But when the picture was made into a jigsaw puzzle by Mary Underwood, a single working woman, she changed the name to "Best of the season," maybe turning a titillating picture into a statement about equality for women. Wes and I are back in Worcester to tell Bob what we've learned.

Okay, Bob, I can tell you unequivocally that there is no way that this game would have ever occurred. It's total fantasy, total fabrication.

Bob: So maybe my grandmother didn't play football back in 1894?

Wes: Your grandmother didn't play football. Nobody's grandmother played football. But we did find that this was published in a magazine called "Truth" magazine, and it was published as the centerfold and so –

Elyse: Sexy, racy. this is --

Bob: This is a sexy 1894?

Elyse: This is it.

Bob: This is sexy 1894?

Elyse: This is it. This is where they were going. What do you think of that?

Bob: Well, they got a long ways to go to get sexy.

[laughter]

Wes: They still look sexy to me.

Bob: I think they did a pretty good job. They do show the knee.

Wes: That's true and they're in dresses.



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Bob: That's great.

Wes: That really makes it interesting and special in my view, yes.

Bob: Well, I don't think the picture will compete with "Playboy" today.

Wes: To think that Mary Underwood, a very proper woman in 1914, would take that picture.

Bob: I give Mary Underwood a lot of credit for this, to risk cutting a puzzle out of that image.

Elyse: We've discovered that there's only one other Mary Underwood jigsaw puzzle left in the world. It's owned by a collector in California...or at least it was.

Bob: Okay.

Elyse: Bob, there were two puzzles done by Mary E. Underwood.

Bob: Just two?

Elyse: Just two known in existence. Will you help me?

Wes: yup.

Elyse: We have a surprise for you. This is the second one.

Bob: Oh, yes.

Elyse: We tracked it down and it's a present for you.

Bob: Look at that.

Elyse: So now you own both Mary E. Underwood puzzles.

Bob: That's being a bit greedy, but thank you tremendously. It's just terrific! And believe it or not, it might need a little bit of a Bob Armstrong restoration.

[laughter]

ENDS