



## **Episode 9, Cast Iron Eagle, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York City**

Wes Cowan: Our last story investigates a massive eagle that may have stood watch over a railroad empire. In the decades after the Civil War, railroads were at the heart of an industrial revolution that was transforming much of the country. One of the wealthiest tycoons of the day was Cornelius Vanderbilt. His base of power: New York City and the legendary railroad terminal Grand Central Station. One hundred years later, a 10-foot tall eagle overlooking a family farm in Sussex, New Jersey, may have once had a far more glamorous view of the Empire State and the great riches of the Gilded Age. I'm Wes Cowan and I've come to the Space Farms Zoo and Museum, which has been fascinating visitors since the 1930's – with a slightly bizarre collection of zoo animals and down-home Americana! Talk about a blast from the past!

Wes: This place is just full of great stuff. Parker Space said he'd meet me under the eagle.

Parker Space: You must be Wes.

Wes: How are you today?

Parker: Good. How are you doing?

Wes: I haven't been to a place like this since I was a kid. I mean, this place just speaks Americana. How did it all come together?

Parker: Well, my grandfather was a collector of, I guess you would say everything. He really never threw anything out. I remember when I was kid, you know, he'd come back with a trailer. Sometimes there'd be a car on it, sometimes there's be a sleigh on it and one day he came back with an eagle on it.

Wes: Parker, where'd this eagle come from?

Parker: The way the family story goes is that back in the 1970's, my father got it from a junkyard in Newberg, New York.

Wes: Now, any idea what junkyard?

Parker: No. We don't have any records on it.

Wes: What do you know about it?



Parker: Summer before last a fellow stopped up and told us it was one of several eagles off of Grand Central Station.

Wes: When you say Grand Central, you mean Grand Central Station in New York?

Parker: Yes.

Wes: The railroad station?

Parker: The railroad station.

Wes: Wow! So there were several other eagles that he knew about?

Parker: Supposedly. That's what he believes.

Wes: Alright, Parker, so what is it that you want me to find out?

Parker: Well, I'd like to see if you could get to the bottom of the story and find out who made the eagle and why.

Wes: Well, that's some interesting questions. It's a great thing. You mind if I get up on a ladder and take a look at it? I'd love to get some pictures of it.

Parker: No, go ahead. Help yourself.

Wes: The eagle appears to have been assembled from multiple sections. The globe is two different pieces. The feet are all separate. The legs are separate. The body is separate. The head. The wings are in two pieces that are physically then bolted together. It's just a great piece of cast iron sculpture. If this was on a building, the building it was on was an enormous, imposing structure. So, could it have been on a train station? Sure. Parker gave me the name of the guy who told him the eagle was originally from the train station. I want to chase him down, but first I'm heading to the New York Public Library for some digging of my own. Cornelius Vanderbilt was one of the great robber barons of the 19th century. He had amassed by the early 1960's a huge shipping empire and now he'd turned his eyes to the railroads. He thought he could make tremendous amounts of money, so he systematically bought railroad lines. Vanderbilt was right. As the nation industrialized following the Civil War, more and more freight was carried by railcar, eventually making Vanderbilt the richest man in the country. The first railroad terminal in New York City, Vanderbilt's Grand Central Depot, was opened in October, 1871. Here's the car barn, where all the railroad cars were kept. Two hundred foot ceiling. Grand Central has been reconstructed several times. And I can't make out any eagles on this first building. But this is



interesting. As Vanderbilt was building his empire, many ordinary Americans were paying a shocking price for the growth of the railroads. Low wages produced violent strikes and at Grand Central there were pollution problems and numerous accidents. Listen to this: "Despite Grand Central's obvious virtues as a work of architecture and engineering, only five weeks after its official opening the *New York Times* declared the station a death trap." It was really apparent, almost from the beginning that Grand Central Depot wasn't going to work. It was too dangerous. There was so much traffic coming into it that it couldn't accommodate it. People were trying to cross the train lines and they were actually getting killed. In 1898, an expanded Grand Central opened. As I scrutinized the new terminal, I make a discovery. There are four clock towers, and each has some sort of decorative sculpture around it. They look like our eagle. And here's a picture showing the towers with the eagles located around them. Seems the station was rebuilt again in 1913. That's the Grand Central terminal standing today. But there's nothing here about what happened to the eagles that had once stood guard over the building. Dave Morrison is the guy who suggested to Parker his eagle might be from Grand Central. Dave worked for the railroads for 25 years and is a railroad history buff. So Dave, I brought something I want to show you. Parker told me that you're the one that told him that told him that his eagle was from Grand Central Station. I mean, how did you know?

Dave Morrison: Wes, I knew right away. It was like finding a long lost friend.

Wes: In the early 1990's, Dave tells me he saw a photograph of an eagle on display at a railroad station in upstate New York. It had been taken in 1965 by Daily News photographer David McClane. McClane had grown obsessed with finding the great eagles that had once stood guard over Grand Central. Was he successful?

Dave: Fortunately, he was able to identify nine other eagles that were on the old building. And this particular article appeared in the January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1966 Daily News.

Wes: There you go... "They're Yard Birds Now – Readers Help Locate Grand Central Eagles". Wow. That is just great! McClane's passion for finding the eagles became Dave's. One he photographed even carried fingerprints from the Vanderbilt family itself.

Dave: The proof is right here. That's a photograph of a plaque that I took that was below one of the eagles.

Wes: Okay, it says, "Original eagles erected on the Grand Central Depot, New York City, 1898. Transported in Northport in 1910 by W. K. Vanderbilt, Jr." Well, I guess that's sort of your smoking gun, isn't it?

Dave: Yes, that's right.



Wes: But how was he sure that the New Jersey eagle had once been part of the Manhattan celebrity roost?  
Dave refers me to Don Quick, an expert in cast iron art who he says actually restored two of the original Grand Central eagles. Don, I know that these eagles were supposedly put up in 1898. When was cast iron popular?

Don Quick: Cast iron is a building material, and as a sculpture material had been around, actually, for hundreds of years.....

Wes: In the decades after the Civil War, as the market for iron musket balls and munitions collapsed, foundries began producing more cast iron ornamentation.

Don: The process has always been similar. But cast iron in building design and the expression of art, reaches a popularity after the Civil War; roughly a period from 1865 until about 1880.

Wes: But what about Parker's eagle? Don says a few years ago, two of the former Grand Central eagles were brought to his shop to be cleaned up and restored.

Wes: When you see this one...I mean, how can you be absolutely sure that this eagle is the same as the ones that you've restored?

Don: Well, if you work with them enough, you start to see commonalities to them. It's actually made of approximately 14 different pieces.

Wes: He shows me photographs of one of the eagles as it arrived at his shop and was disassembled.

Don: Here you can see the lower half of a wing. Here you can see part of the globe that the eagle is standing on. Part of the square base. Here is the lower half of a wing, upper half of a wing. And here is the main body of the eagle.

Wes: One of the things that Parker really wants to know about his eagle is who made the eagle. Did you see any foundry name, artist's signature, anything like that?

Don: Actually....no.

Wes: Oh, no. You're kidding me! Doesn't that surprise you, though? I mean, here's this unbelievable masterpiece of cast iron and whoever made it is completely anonymous.

Don: This is a phenomenon. It existed in the industry then and it exists in the industry now, that at times an owner may have made a decision that they do not want any of the foundry marks on there.



Wes: As Don shows me around the foundry, I quickly get a sense of the dirt, danger and craftsmanship involved in working cast iron. It seems ironic that while the robber barons of the Gilded Age chose cast iron to decorate their businesses and homes, the craftsmen who did the work remained anonymous. Don tells me that the labor intensive nature of the work was part of the reason cast iron fell from fashion.

Don: It required so many specialty skills. You had the skills of model makers, the skills of pattern makers, the skills of foundry men. You had the physical hot dirty labor.

Wes: By the turn of the century, iron was also losing ground to a revolutionary new material. A metal that would build the 20th century.

Don: The Bessemer process for converting iron ore into steel came along. And that was the death knell of cast iron as an architectural material and largely as a decorative material. Steel is a superior product. The foundries died because they couldn't adapt to the new technology.

Wes: But as his own business indicates, cast iron is not entirely a thing of the past.

Don: As an architectural material it's seen somewhat of a resurgence since the 1970's when there became an interest in historic preservation.

Wes: Don suggests that if I want to understand the real value of Parker's eagle, I ought to take a trip to the current Grand Central.

John: I'm John Belle.

Frank: I'm Frank Prial.

Wes: Architects John Belle and Frank Prial explain how the station narrowly dodged the developer's wrecking ball in the mid-1970's. With the help a Supreme Court ruling and the defense in the press by New York notables, including Jackie Kennedy Onassis, the great station was saved. In the late 1980's, the architects helped restore the building to the splendor of earlier days – and it's place at the heart of the city.

John: It always seemed to me that it was just performing the function of a great square, the way that European cities have their town square. This is our town square. The only difference is it has a hat on. And the hat is a very beautiful roof.



Wes: Absolutely. John and Frank say the choice of an eagle for ornamentation of the second Grand Central captured the themes and idea of the nation at the dawn of the so-called American Century.

John: The eagles were recognized nationally as a symbol of the country's growth. They represented flight, movement, travel, if you will.

Frank: The eagles were a symbol of patriotism and they were perfectly appropriate for a station such as this, which acknowledged the strength not only of the city but of the railroads as well.

Wes: Don Quick told me that these eagles would cost today \$250,000 each to make. So, in a sense, they were an extravagant adornment.

John: Well, I think the Vanderbilt's were flexing their economic muscle and their power, just showing the world that they'd made it and they could spend \$250,000 on a piece of sculpture, if they wanted to.

Wes: Do you derive any particular symbolism out of the ball that they're sitting on? I was wondering if that might be symbolizing the globe. You know, this in 1898, during our first foray into colonialism when we've invaded Cuba and the Philippines.

John: I think it very much was meant to represent the world and the globalization of this world. And who better than Vanderbilt to do that.

Wes: When the eagles were taken off of the old station, why weren't they put back when the terminal opened in 1913?

John: Oh, I think there are a couple of reasons. I mean, there was a deliberate objective here to make the third railroad facility on this site quite different from the previous two. We were out of the steam age. We were in the electrification age. We were in a new century.

Wes: But Frank and John have something else for me. And what they point to outside the station allows me to wrap up my investigation.

Wes: You know, Parker, you wanted me to find out who made the eagles. And, unfortunately, I wasn't able to get that information. On the other hand, I did find some things that I think you're going to be very interested in.

John: And, Wes, here we are at the site of one of the two eagles that have returned to Grand Central to roost.



Wes: As the restoration of Grand Central proceeded, the architects made a decision. The eagles from the earlier building should have a place on the new.

Wes: Home again!

John: Home again, indeed.

Frank: Many people are not even aware that there was another building here, or in fact two buildings before Grand Central terminal was built. These eagles allow us to tell those stories to a new generation of people who may not be aware of what came before, and learn a little bit more about the expansion of the country, of the growth of the cities and of the role that the railroads and the Vanderbilt's played.

Parker: It definitely enlightened me to know the truth behind the eagle. It's going to stand here for many more generations to come. So, you know, that the people can always enjoy it.

Wes: Knowing what we know now, what do you think your grandfather would think?

Parker: Now, I think he would have been you know, pretty proud of what he picked up. He had an eye for something of historical value and I think he hit it right on the money.

Wes: By the turn of the century, Cornelius Vanderbilt and his son William were gone. But their sprawling empire had helped bind the nation more tightly than ever, and laid the tracks for a golden age of rail travel in the first half of the 20th century.