

# 'Phenom' stretched readers' imaginations in 1915

"One of the most interesting phenoms in this country is at Indiana University this week . . . He has appeared before the foremost medical men of this country and has astonished them with his wonderful control of the muscles and joints of his body."

— *Bloomington Weekly Courier*, Nov. 19, 1915.

Perhaps the newspaper story in the *Courier* was intended for an April Fools Day edition and got printed in November by mistake. Or, just maybe, what the man could do was possible after all.

The visitor's name was Stanley Simonsen, and his age was 23. There is no hint in the article about



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

how Dr. B.D. Myers, dean of the IU School of Medicine, happened to hear about the man in the first place, but apparently Simonsen's appearance before the medical students was officially sanctioned.

The reason was made abundantly clear by the *Courier*. "Prof. Simonsen appeared before the entire medical school yesterday morning, and

for an hour demonstrated the different dislocations of the body, showing the positions of the bones when a joint is dislocated. He can control the flow of his blood, and claims to be able to shut off the flow of blood from a limb, so that it will become numb and black."

If that were Simonsen's only feat, it would not have been a "phenom," as the newspaper so quaintly put it. He had other things more startling to demonstrate for his audience in Owen Hall.

Explained the *Courier*, "Prof. Simonsen is amazing the local educators by his feats. He can increase his height 6½ inches from normal and his reach 15 inches from nor-

mal. He will stand beside a man who is several inches taller than he is and then stretch so that he seems to grow instantly taller than the normal man."

Perhaps the term "seems to grow" is the most important part of the account in the newspaper. Today, we have a tendency to believe that the "good old days" were very simple — that the art of deceiving a gullible public did not take all that much sophistication on the part of the deceiver.

Actually, in the time setting of this story, there was, indeed, an unsuspecting public to be deceived. But those who wanted to take financial advantage of the public's naive-

te were far more cunning than we suspect.

A case could be made in the instance of this story for a con artist cleverly at work, but there are some missing pieces of information from the newspaper's account. For example, was he paid to put on the demonstration for the medical students and faculty? The *Courier* added to its account that Simonsen was "appearing at chapter houses around the university this week showing members of the liberal arts schools his accomplishments."

An amusing side of the story is how he came to be in the muscle

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