

# BIG GUST

GRANTSBURG'S  
LEGENDARY GIANT



Compiled and Written  
by  
Eunice Kanne

*Edith Falset*

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**Published by**

**Grantsburg Area Historical Society**

**1st Edition**

**1989**



Coming into Grantsburg from the south, one can observe a glass case in front of the Grantsburg Community Center. This case contains a life-size carving of Grantsburg's giant policeman, called Big Gust by the townspeople whom he served for nearly a quarter of a century.

The statue, carved by Alf Olson, a local artist, was dedicated in September, 1980.

Gust Anderson was born Anders Gustaf Hagberg at Odinsvik Soker Westvarmland, Sweden, January 15, 1872. He had three sisters and two brothers.

Gust was fondly remembered by all who knew him as "Big Gust" for he was a well proportioned 7 feet 6 inches. How he came to be so tall one can only speculate. His sister, Mrs. Gust Hedlund, gave this explanation. When he was about three years old, Gust was not growing as fast as he should, so his parents took him to a Swedish doctor who gave him some medication. His family attributed his size to the effect of the medicine.

In June of 1892 Big Gust came to America, accompanied by his sister and brother-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Gust Hedlund. The Hedlunds settled on land by Little Wood Lake in rural Grantsburg. Gust spent some time in Omaha, Nebraska, where he was employed by a machinery company. While in Nebraska, he applied for his citizenship papers. Gust became a United States citizen September 16, 1902. He came to Burnett County to make his home with the Hedlunds for three years, helping them to clear the land and also working at the nearby Jacobson Saw Mill.<sup>9</sup>



In the late 1890's he went to Superior, Wisconsin, to work on the coal docks and later got a job with the Superior police force. These were exciting times for the young 7 foot 6 inch officer. One evening a call came to the station from a 3rd Street saloon. The sergeant turned the call over to Big Gust, who upon arrival found the saloon rough and noisy. He called for quiet with no results. Someone turned out the lights, so Gust knew there would be more trouble. He saw men making their way toward him along the long bar in the darkened room. With his night club and long reach, he made quick work in controlling the group. Twenty rowdies went to jail.<sup>9</sup>

While Gust was in Superior, his size made him somewhat of a celebrity as one can conclude from the following article which appeared in the June 18, 1897 issue of The Journal of Burnett County taken from a reprint of the West Superior Telegram and the Minneapolis Journal.

### **A BURNETT COUNTY BOY**

The tallest policeman in the United States, Gust Anderson of the Superior Police Dept., has been furnished with a star and credentials by Mayor Charles Sylvester Starkweather and will join a traveling show. He is now about 22 years old and weighs 325 pounds. His height is 7 feet 6 inches and his strength enormous. He was born September, 1872, in Medal Park, 14 miles from Stockholm, and he says he has not reached his full growth.

More evidence of his height and strength was re-



called by a Siren resident in 1983. He told of his father being in Superior one day where he chanced to pass a street side show. A barker was calling, "Come and see the big man from Borneo - ten cents." The big man from Borneo was Gust, who worked at this side show for a short time.<sup>14</sup>

No doubt he wasn't comfortable as a "side show" spectacle, for he was a quiet, modest man, who would sit with his back to the public in restaurants because people, especially children, were prone to stare at him.<sup>13</sup>

His career as a policeman in Superior was cut short by a bout of typhoid fever. After being treated in the hospital, he returned to his sister's home at Little Wood Lake to recuperate.<sup>9</sup>

In May 1902, Gust accepted the job as village marshal of Grantsburg, Wisconsin, and served in this position for 25 years. His initial pay of \$50.00 a month was later amended to \$35.00 a month during the winter seasons. He also served as street commissioner, pound master, lamplighter, president of the fire department and, at the time of his death, village assessor. Many stories have been told and recorded that tell of his years of service.<sup>18</sup>

One of these stories is of two drunks causing a disturbance in the local saloon. Big Gust appeared and, taking one man under each arm, proceeded up Madison Avenue toward the jail. At Thoreson's Corner, Oak and Madison, the men asked to be put down. From there they walked peacefully to the jail two blocks away.



On another occasion, two rowdies were picked up by their collars, one in each of Gust's hands. Holding them at arm's length, Big Gust was safe from their efforts to reach him as he carried them off to jail.

Strangers were always awed to see such a big man. A traveling salesman who arrived in town about midnight, parked his car on Madison Avenue and started to look for a hotel. As he neared the bank corner, Madison and Pine, he saw by the light of the full moon what appeared to be a statue. Looking closer, he realized the "statue" moved and it wasn't until he heard Big Gust's deep voice asking, "What is it you want?" that he realized it was a person. Marshall Anderson was on the job!<sup>13</sup>

Big Gust frequently ate at a family style restaurant. One waitress recalls, he was as tall sitting as she was standing.<sup>15</sup>

When Dr. E.N. Liljeberg came to town, the first two people he saw were Big Gust, 7 feet 6 inches, and Little Andrew Anderson, 5 feet 3 inches. The thought occurred to the doctor that Grantsburg must be a place of giants and dwarfs.<sup>6</sup>

As marshall, Gust worked at various jobs for the village. At the village scales he helped weigh the potato wagons before and after unloading.<sup>11</sup> In 1916, when the old high school was built, he helped lay the sidewalk. In 1925 or 1926 he worked with the crew that put in the sewage system on Main Street.<sup>4</sup> As lamplighter, he'd go along the village street replacing burned-out carbide lights with fresh carbon rods. Children picked up the discarded sticks and used them



to write on paper. He also collected monthly fees for the light company.<sup>1</sup>

Children always seemed awed by Big Gust's unusual size. One little boy, when he'd go to town with his father, would hide behind his father's pants leg when he saw Big Gust. Later, they went to the shoe shop and saw a pair of Big Gust's shoes waiting for repair. The boy's father slid his own shoe inside Big Gust's with ease. A local merchant exhibited Big Gust's size 18 boot in his shop window with a baby's size 000 on top of it.<sup>12</sup>

Because of his size, Gust's clothing had to be made especially for him from his marshall's cap to his large boots. Mrs. Gust Fornell made his shirts. To lay out the pattern on the fabric, she would move the furniture back to make room on the floor. There was so much fabric in his shirts that little girls' dresses were made from his cast offs.<sup>8</sup>

His height came in handy at times also. One day he was helping Charley Erickson, who was in charge of the village light plant, string some electric wires. The wires were to be strung outside a building, but the available ladder did not extend high enough. Going to a window on the second floor of the building, Big Gust held Charley far enough out of the window to reach the wires.<sup>17</sup>

Today's average automobile would hardly accommodate Big Gust's size. As a passenger in an early open touring car, when Big Gust placed his right foot on the running board with his left leg crossed over the right leg, his left foot would rest on the fender. Some



of the early cars did not have doors. If he were riding in the later Model T Ford with a top, the top had to be put down to make room for his height.<sup>4</sup>

Often Gust had to duck to get through doors and bend his head to keep from bumping it on some ceilings.<sup>5</sup>

It was said that Big Gust probably did not know his own strength. Charley Erickson had engaged Gust to assist in moving a small house. Charley was scurrying around to get the jacks in the proper position for raising the building when Big Gust took hold of a large timber and, inserting it as a pry, lifted one end of the building while Charley moved some blocks. Charley then grabbed the pry to hang on to it while Gust moved to another point. As soon as Gust loosened his hold, the weight of the house flung the timber in the air and landed Charley on top of the building. In his slow and easy manner, Gust reached up one hand and again pulled down the pry to raise the house.<sup>18</sup>

Another time he was helping some men move a small building. In the process, it was necessary to pry up the building. With Big Gust on the end of the pry, the building was well off the ground. As he had to go to another pry, he asked two men to hold the first one down for him. In no time, the men were up and the building was down.

Again his mighty power is recalled in the loading of three iron scrapers used for road work. One scraper remained to be hoisted to the top of the load when Big Gust came along. He took hold of it with both hands





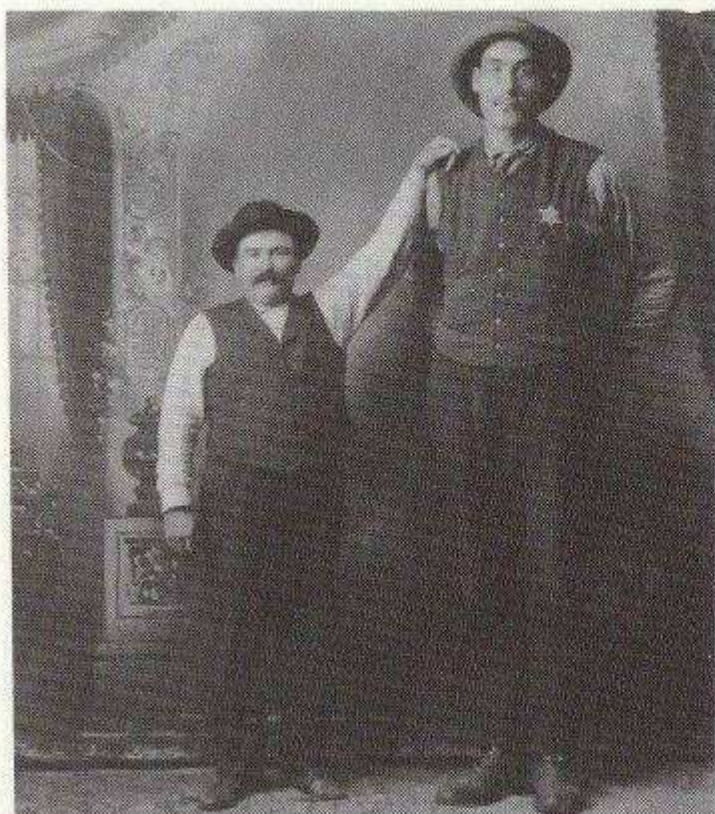
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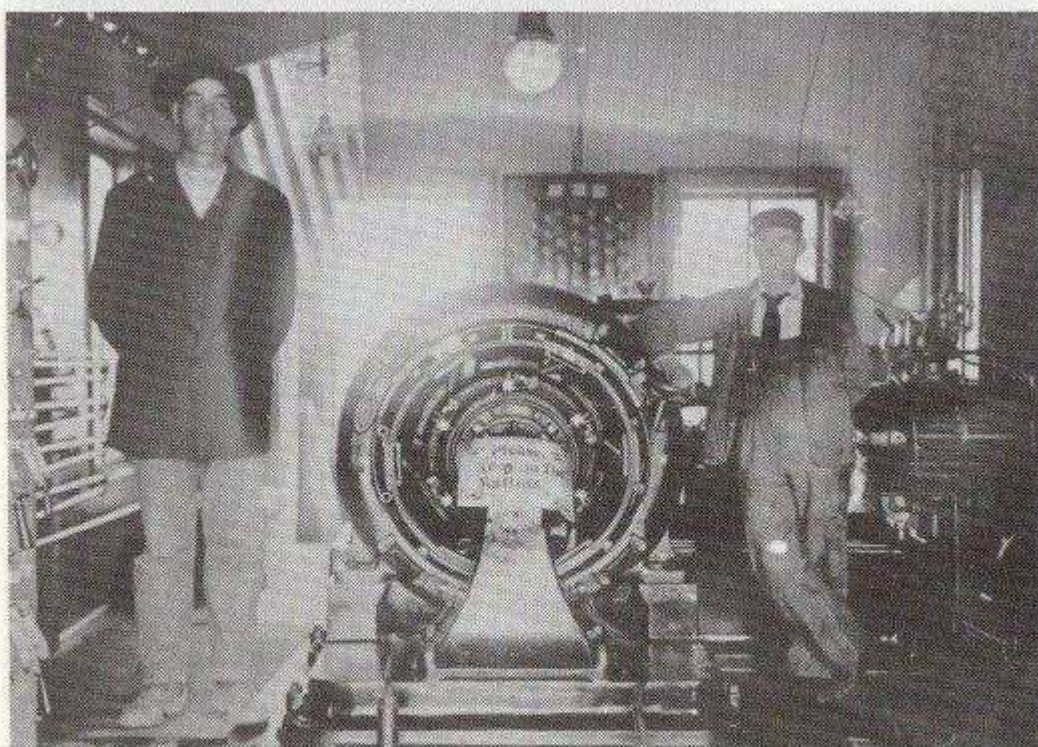
Big Gust  
Superior, Wisconsin  
Policeman

(7)



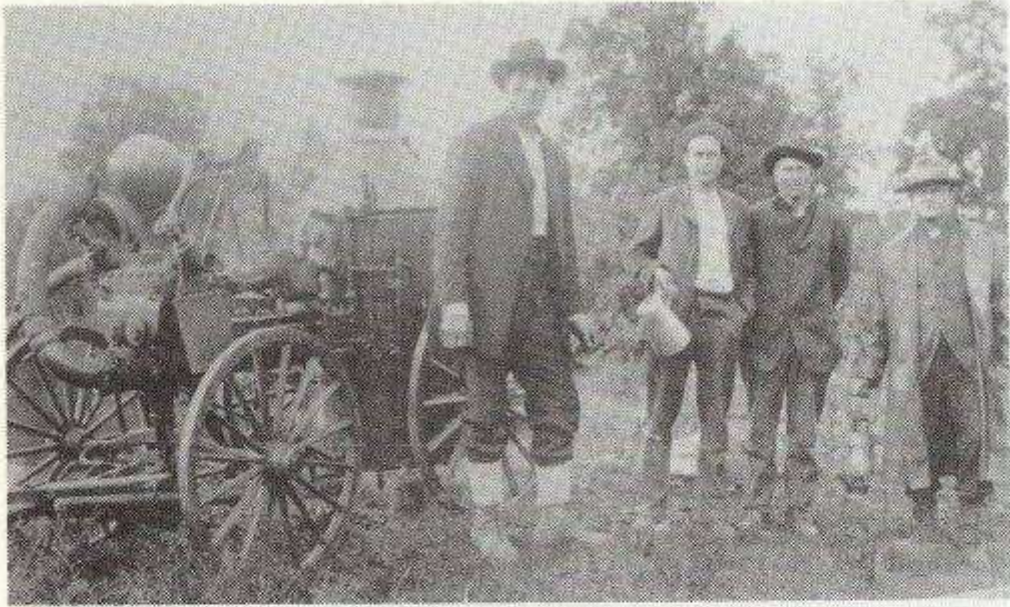


Big Gust  
and  
Martin  
Giswold



Big Gust and Charley Erickson at power plant.





Fire Department with steam pumper.



Picnicking with Edla Linden, Edla Johnson and  
Walfrid Johnson.





Big Gust and two young friends  
after his accident.



and lifted it to the top of the load. When the team arrived at the work place, it took three average sized men to unload one iron dirt scraper.<sup>18</sup>

One day a load of railroad ties had arrived in town and an official was looking for a crew to unload them. Big Gust surveyed the situation, walked over and lifted one tie from the flat car. He told the man he would like the job and they discussed the pay. When Gust learned he would not be paid what the official offered for a crew to do the same work, he went over and replaced the one tie and walked away.<sup>9</sup>

A store clerk told of the time he was putting wheels on a manure spreader after putting a jack under the axle. Somehow the axle slipped off the jack and onto the ground. Just then, Big Gust came by and seeing the man's dilemma, said, "Having trouble?" Whereupon he took hold of the axle, saying, "Get the wheel." In no time the wheel was in place without the aid of the jack.<sup>13</sup>

There's a story of a barn raising in the Little Wood Lake area about 1905. Big Gust, who was living with his sister's family nearby, was one of the builders. He would lift one end of a log to put it in place while six or seven Swedes were required to lift the other end.<sup>4</sup>

When one of the village blacksmiths was having trouble shoeing a horse, he called for Big Gust. Upon arrival, Gust placed the horse's hoof over his knee and held it while the shoeing was going on. When the job was finished, Gust mopped his brow and said, "That was hard work."<sup>3</sup>



Carl Hedlund, Big Gust's nephew, wrote about the time his father and Gust were coming home by a horse and wagon from Grantsburg. It was winter, and on the way home a wet, heavy snow began to fall. As the snow became heavier, the horse was having a difficult time. Big Gust said, "We have to get home some way." Getting out of the wagon, he tied a rope to it and walking beside the horse, helped to pull the vehicle for the last three miles.

Big Gust must have enjoyed celebrating the Fourth of July, especially the fireworks — the noisy ones. One Fourth while he was village marshall, he secretly prepared a dynamite charge down by the mill dam. Using an extra long fuse and several sticks of dynamite, he lit it early in the morning. The explosion was tremendous. Windows were broken in town and folks came running from all over in their night clothes to investigate. Big Gust had this to say, "I guess I made too big a firecracker." He was busy for days replacing broken window panes.<sup>9</sup>

A committee was set up for another Fourth of July celebration to be held in Grantsburg. It was decided to do an early morning wake-up to open the festivities and Big Gust agreed to help. The committee especially wanted to awaken two of the village notables, A.P. Nelson, home from Washington, D.C. where he served the area in Congress, and J.H. Jensen, the area's representative in Madison.

Having no guns or cannons, they decided dynamite would have to do. The three men went to V.E. Hawley's Hardware and when V.E. heard their plans, he gave them the caps, fuses and dynamite.



Early the next morning, Big Gust and one of the committee members went up Pine Street, stopping near J.H. Jensen's home. They prepared the charges, supposedly fusing them for simultaneous detonation. Not so. Gust's charge blew first. Windows cracked up and down the street. Someone yelled, "Stop!", before the second charge went off. Too late. There was another loud blast and more windows were shattered.

Big Gust and the committee members paid for 13 window panes and Gust again was busy replacing glass.<sup>2</sup>

There was a time when the train crews spent nights at the Antler Hotel in Grantsburg, returning the trains to Rush City, Minnesota, the next morning. Becoming great friends of Big Gust's, the crew decided one Halloween to play a joke on him. They made a giant wheelbarrow, using 3x12x20 foot timbers and the wheels and axle from a coach car. This was assembled and left in front of Gust's living quarters.

The next morning the crew arrived at the train station and found the wheelbarrow standing on the platform. They had been totally unaware that Big Gust had been watching their activity and knew who was responsible for the prank.

Big Gust enjoyed games as well. As manager of the baseball team, he would bat the ball to the players during warmup. How small the bat and ball must have looked in his hands!<sup>13</sup>

Big Gust was a whiz at playing checkers. When he reached out to move his checkers, little could be seen



of the board until Gust removed his hand. A traveling man who came to town liked to play with Gust and was a good match. They would play until closing time in one of the village restaurants.<sup>13</sup>

Big Gust was fond of fishing. He and Walfrid Johnson, who owned a boat, would go to the St. Croix River in Walfrid's Studebaker EMF. Big Gust said the EMF stood for "Every Morning, Fix." One time, while traveling the sandy road to the river, a tire went flat. All looked hopeless until Big Gust got out and lifted the car telling Walfrid to put a block under it. With Gust's help the tire was repaired and they were on their way.<sup>5</sup>

Living quarters were arranged for him in the fire-hall on Burnett Avenue, but he took most of his meals at the Walfrid Johnson home. He was remembered as a kindly person who loved kids and spent time with them. He would even "babysit" the children when Mrs. Johnson went grocery shopping.<sup>5</sup>

In 1904, Gust purchased a house at 113 W. Broadway. The land had been owned by Canute Anderson, called "Father of Grantsburg." He remodeled it into a two family dwelling. Gust raised the house, put in a basement and added a kitchen. The tenants and their children enjoyed having their landlord, Big Gust, work around the property.<sup>7</sup>

Young people knew he was their friend. He frequently carried peanuts and other treats in his spacious pockets. Children knew this and when they helped themselves, Big Gust didn't mind.<sup>9</sup>



A small boy was having trouble watching a parade because others would crowd in front of him. Big Gust, who was nearby, came over and said, "Here, you stand in front of me. I'm bigger than you."<sup>10</sup>

Parents would hold up their children so they could shake Big Gust's hand. He always had time for youngsters.

Unfortunately, mothers were known to frighten their children with such remarks as, "Be good or we'll get Big Gust to take care of you." Such remarks, if they reached him, must have hurt deeply, for he was sensitive in spite of his size.

Although he had little formal education, Gust acquired a set of eight volumes on surveying and taught the science to himself. Later he laid out many roads in the area. He was a member of the International Union of Steam Engineers.<sup>9</sup>

He volunteered his skills to build the English Lutheran Church of which he was a charter member.<sup>9</sup>

Gust was not without his troubles. On a wintry December day in 1918, he slipped on ice in front of the fire hall and broke his hip. He had two crutches at the time and later a single one to help him walk for the rest of his days. The crutch made for him, now on display at the Grantsburg Area Historical Society Museum, along with other items that belonged to him, gives an indication of his size.<sup>18</sup>

In the latter part of October, 1926, Gust became ill and was taken to Fairview Hospital in Minneapolis,



Minnesota. People who visited him there remembered that two beds had to be placed together end to end to accommodate his height.<sup>16</sup>

Suffering from cancer of the pancreas and stomach, he died in the hospital November 4, 1926, at the age of 54 years.<sup>18</sup>

Funeral services were held Monday, November 8, 1926 at the English Lutheran Church and interment was made at Riverside Cemetery in Grantsburg with the Rev. B.N. Glim of Trade Lake officiating. Many people came to pay their last respects. So many, it was said to be one of the largest funerals ever held in this area. A.P. Nelson, the area's Congressman, and F.R. Huth, publisher of The Journal of Burnett County, gave short talks. The pallbearers were members of the Modern Woodman Lodge, of which Gust was a member.<sup>18</sup>

Big Gust is remembered as a big-hearted, gentle man, one who was never known to say anything that hurt anyone's feelings. Rather than say an ill word about anyone, he'd say nothing. It was said that no one had ever seen Big Gust angry or unkind.

Many felt that Big Gust had great foresight, that he was ahead of his time. The village president, at the time of Gust's death, said, "Had we followed his advice on some of the village projects, the village could have saved money."

In his small New Testament Bible, Big Gust had written on the last page in Swedish, "Anyone who reads these verses will be much benefited by them."<sup>9</sup>





This collection of stories and anecdotes was made possible by the contributions of the following individuals:

1. Alice Anderson
2. John Anderson
3. Roy Anderson
4. Frank Becvar
5. Alice Biederman
6. Joyce Christian
7. Russell Erickson
8. Gene Fornell
9. Hedlund Family
10. Herbert Kanne
11. Lester Larson
12. Joe Marek
13. Ingbert Martinson
14. Roy Olson
15. Ruth Rockland
16. Marlin Sundquist
17. Cheryl Tietz
18. The Journal of Burnett County

(Number at end of paragraphs indicates contributor.)

We also thank Judy Pearson, Berdella Johnson, Mariam Lang and Alton Jensen for their help in the preparation and planning of this booklet.

