

## Museums

The descendants of the private commercial museums that flourished in New York City in the late nineteenth century are now clustered in Niagara Falls, Ont.

One may choose among Tussaud's Wax Museum, the Frankenstein Museum, the Niagara Falls Museum, the Houdini Museum, Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum, the Life Museum and the Movieland Museum.



Clifton Hill, Niagara Falls, Ontario.

## The Daring Young and Old Men and Women

**1859:** Blondin—who was called that because of his long, silky hair—was really Jean François Gravelet from Hesdin, France. When he began performing as an acrobat at the age of ten he was called *The Little Wonder* and since he was slim, short and compact all his life, *The Little Wonder* he remained. He came to Niagara in 1859 and said he would walk across the Falls on a rope. He did—the rope was three inches thick and 1,500 feet long and secured by guy ropes. He walked to the swaying middle carrying a thirty-eight-foot balancing pole, sank to his knees and lay down as on a hammock, pretending to sleep. The crowd roared.

He went back and forth for the next two summers, outdoing himself at every turn. Once he lowered a cord to the steamer *Maid-of-the-Mist* far below, where someone attached a flask of water, which he pulled up and drank. He carried a twenty-pound stove out and cooked and ate an omelet. He did a backward somersault. He walked

across at night in the glare of a locomotive headlight. He balanced a chair on the rope and stood on it. He went over on stilts.

Finally, he carried his manager Harry Colcord across on his shoulders. He and Harry each weighed about 145, pounds and halfway across he persuaded Harry to get off so he could rest. Harry had to get off six more times before they made it to the end. They were watched by 300,000 people, including the Prince of Wales.

Blondin then went to London to the Crystal Palace where he performed for the next thirty-seven years, until he retired at seventy-two.

**1864:** Blondin acquired a rival named Guillermo Farini who duplicated everything he did except walk the rope on stilts. One August day in 1864 Farini branched out on his own. He put on a pair of stilts, but instead of walking the rope he strolled around in the rapids above the American Falls. As the crowd grew, he edged closer and closer to the

## The Strange Saga of the Hills

One summer day in 1891, Layfield Hill threw his five-year-old son William into the Niagara River, telling him to sink or swim. William swam.

In the course of the next six decades William "Red" Hill and his sons would pursue careers saving lives and defying death. The epoch would end tragically.

Red went through the lower rapids in a barrel on three separate occasions and swam the half mile of roaring water below Horseshoe Falls between the United States and Canada, but his reputation was built primarily as a life saver. Whenever a daredevil appeared to perform, Red would be standing by. He helped save twenty-nine persons, and he and his sons reclaimed the bodies of 250 persons who had drowned. He was the only man to win the Life Saving Medal four

times. He died in 1942.

His sons, William "Red" Jr. and Major, followed in his steps. Both shot the lower rapids and helped save many lives.

In 1951 Red Jr. decided to try the ultimate feat, something his father had never dared. He constructed a fragile cylinder he called "The Thing", made of thirteen inflated rubber tubes held together with canvas webbing and fish nets. At 2:50 p.m., Sunday, August 5, he crawled inside and pushed off into the upper rapids. He was immediately in trouble. The water tossed the device in the air and the rocks ripped the nets and webbing. As it went over the crest The Thing was already coming apart, and it disintegrated when it hit the water below. Hill's battered body, stripped of its clothing, was recovered the next day.