

Niagara's most famous mummy

Laura Ranieri Special to The Standard

Friday, April 20, 2012 5:39:19 EDT PM



Above: **Mummy of Ramesses I. Thebes, Deir el-Bahri Cache (DB 320).**
Early Dynasty 19, ca. 1292 BC. Human remains, linen. Charlotte Lichirie Collection of Ancient Egyptian Art, Photo ©2002, Robin Davis.

The mummy Ramses I

You may remember the original story from the late 1990s — Pharaoh Ramses I, a military powerhouse and grandfather of Ramses the Great, arrived in Niagara some decades after 1812, through a shady antiquities purchase made in Egypt.

The 3,000-year-old mummy spent the better part of the last century lying unidentified, a mysterious royal mummy across from the two-headed calf and other curiosities in the old Niagara Falls Museum.

Now, for the first time since his return to Egypt, Gayle Gibson, a popular Egyptologist at the Royal Ontario Museum and one of his key identifiers, comes back to Niagara to tell her Ramses discovery tale, and offer other fascinating museum secrets and tips on touring Egypt today.

She's speaking at the Niagara Historical Society and Museum in Niagara-on-the-Lake, May 4 at 7 p.m. It's free for museum members and \$5 for others.

But who was Ramses? And how did he get all the way here and back home again?

"Don't be deceived by the fact that he was king for just two years," said Gibson. "Prior to claiming the throne, he was the vizier of Egypt, the equivalent of a prime minister today."

Indeed, Ramses had an illustrious military career, and claimed the throne in middle age not by blood, but through skill, and as a trusted advisor to King Horemheb. His long list of titles included: Master of Horse, Commander of the Fortress, Controller of the Nile Mouth, Charioteer of His Majesty, King's Envoy to Every Foreign Land, Royal Scribe, Colonel, and General of the Lord of the Two Lands.

Tutankhamen's father, Akhenaten, created horrible suffering and economic dislocation; the country was a real mess," said Gibson. "Horemheb and Ramses were instrumental in getting the country back into a position where future kings could start building beautiful monuments and fighting wars to successfully defend or expand their borders."

Reunification achievements aside, Ramses I was responsible for a number of important firsts: He moved the capital up north to the Delta (where he was born), establishing the great city of Pi Ramesses. He even advanced royal women's rights, by having his wife Sitre become the first to be buried in the Valley of the Queens.

When Ramses himself passed away in 1290 BC, he was buried in an ornate tomb in the Valley of the Kings, probably anticipating nothing more than a journey to the afterlife, hardly expecting it would take more than 3,000 years, via an overseas detour to Niagara Falls. But that is indeed where his mummy came, and remained, for more than a century.

The story of Ramses' journey to Canada began in the 1860s with the transaction of an "excellent mummy in double cases" from an unscrupulous antiquities dealer in the Luxor back streets. James Douglas and Sidney Barnett purchased Ramses I for just seven pounds from Mustapha Aga Ayat, an associate of the notorious Abd el-Rassul family, who had pillaged a valuable cache of royal mummies. Like most New Kingdom tombs, Ramses' final resting place had originally been robbed in antiquity, and his mummy was long ago stripped of its jewels and moved by priests to a special hiding spot on the west bank of Luxor.

Sidney was the son of Thomas Barnett, owner of the Niagara Falls Museum and Daredevil Hall of Fame. He had sent his son overseas to pick up some exotic gimmicks to give him a competitive edge. A good Egyptian mummy more than fit the bill as ancient Egypt was a hot topic in the 1800s. What no one realized then was that this mummy was no ordinary Egyptian curiosity.

And so Ramses crossed the ocean, and resided in the museum until the 1990s. In fact, this writer remembers seeing him there on the third floor in a modest display case with a yellowing label reading "A Royal Mummy." It made me wonder.

Gibson also wondered. And as a respected mummy and coffin expert, she was one of the first Egyptologists who had the knowledge to put all the pieces together.

"I used to always stop off at the museum to look at the interesting mummies and coffins," said Gibson. "It was really intriguing that one mummy looked like a Ramesside — a member of Ramses the Great's family. And he had been found in a coffin that was exactly the kind of coffin he should have been found in to be such a person.

"I began to call him 'Ramses' for luck. I gave a talk about him and did a little article in KMT, the Journal of Modern Egyptology, suggesting that although he was probably a Ptolemaic priest, it was pretty cool to think he just might be Ramses the I."

When the Niagara museum was sold in the late 1990s, Gibson was consultant to buyer William Jamieson and helped sell the coffins, mummies and other parts of the collection to the Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory in Atlanta for about \$2 million (U.S.). It was in Atlanta that the positive identification of the mummy as Ramses was made, and from there the great Pharaoh was triumphantly returned home to Luxor.

You can see Ramses today laid out in the beautiful new Luxor Museum in Egypt.

As for Ramses, I think it's fair to say he was a Canadian Pharaoh — and perhaps our most famous Niagara celebrity and resident. Marilyn Monroe may have shot a movie here, and Houdini performed a great stunt or two. But Ramses remained with us for about 140 years.

Then again, a century and a half is nothing to a dead king with eternity to kill.

What

Egyptologist Gayle Gibson talk on Ramses I

Where

Niagara-on-the-Lake Historical Museum

When

May 4, 7 p.m.

Cost

Free to museum members, \$5 for others.

Information and RSVP

1-800-978-0544. For details on Gayle Gibson's Egypt tour, visit www.youregyptjourney.com