New Year's Day, 1856, dawned clear and cold in Brattleboro, Vermont. But the few people out on the snow-covered streets of town were soon glad that they had gotten up. They scurried home to wake up family and friends with exciting news.

"Get up! There is something wonderful at the corner of Linden and North Main streets. An angel!"

And so there was. It was an eight-foot-high statue with folded wings and a peaceful expression on its face. It had appeared overnight, as if by magic. Most marvelous of all, it was made entirely of snow and ice. It was immediately nicknamed the "Snow Angel."

Because the figure held pen and notebook in its hands, some thought it represented the closing of the old year's record and the opening of the new. So people also called it the "Recording Angel."

Whatever they called it, all who saw the angel were amazed by its beauty and workmanship. It was so lifelike that school boys, who rarely spared any object, refused to make it a target for their snowballs. An elderly man who never bowed to anyone was seen to tip his hat to the statue in respect as he passed.

But Brattleboro's townspeople were most amazed when they found that the maker of the angel was Larkin Goldsmith Mead, Jr. The son of an important town lawyer, Larkin had been known as a very bashful boy. He had spent much of his time alone, sketching flowers and trees. He had occasionally tried his hand at sculpture.

At age nineteen, he had gone to work at a local hardware store. When he wasn't sweeping the floor, weighing out nails, or wrapping up store goods for customers, he passed the time by carving a pig out of a piece of marble he kept behind the counter. An artist, vacationing in Brattleboro, entered the store and saw Larkin carving. He told Larkin that he had talent and helped him to study with a New York City sculptor. But, two years later, when Larkin returned to Brattleboro, he found no work for an artist other than giving drawing lessons at the town hall.

Then, on the last day of December in 1855, when Larkin was twenty-one years old, he decided to use his talents as a sculptor to give his community a Happy New Year's surprise. As soon as darkness fell, Larkin set to work by lantern light. With two close friends, Edward and Henry Burnham, whose father owned an iron foundry close by, he began to make the angel. The brothers brought him snow, which he added to the figure. When the boys got cold, they fired up the oven in the Burnham Foundry to warm themselves. They also melted the dry, powdery snow to make it stick better.
Sometimes Larkin made a hand or other part separately, so that he could more easily mold it. Then he attached it to the figure with wet snow. Slowly the angel took shape. Pouring water over the statue gave it a smooth, shiny look.

Finally, in the early hours of the morning, they finished. Larkin was tired and wet, but he was also pleased. It would do, he decided. He smiled, thinking how surprised people in town would be when the angel was discovered.

That morning crowds gathered to marvel at the statue. Word spread quickly. Main Street filled with sleighs as people from surrounding communities rode in to see the angel for themselves. Stories about the statue appeared in newspapers in Boston and New York, and even Italy.

The statue, made of ice and snow, could not last forever. Two weeks after Larkin created it, a January thaw reduced it to a puddle. But the angel's fame survived. Larkin received a commission from a man in Ohio to make a copy of his angel in stone. Other orders followed, including one for a wooden statue symbolizing agriculture to go on the new statehouse dome in Montpelier.

Soon the state of Vermont asked Larkin to make a statue of Ethan Allen. He sculpted the figure in a dramatic pose. Allen’s right arm is raised in anger as he demands the surrender of Fort Ticonderoga. An exact copy of the statue now stands at the entrance to the Vermont State House.

In 1862 Larkin sailed to Europe to study art. He raised money to pay for the trip by sculpting a bust of Union General George McClellan, which was sold

Main Street, Brattleboro, circa 1860

Larkin G. Mead, Jr., looks at his Snow Angel by lantern light. Illustration from Picturesque Brattleboro, edited by Rev. Frank T. Pomeroy in 1894.
in a raffle. In Italy, he was welcomed by Hiram Powers, a Vermont sculptor who made his home there. Powers had grown up in Woodstock. Larkin liked Italy so much that he decided to settle there as well. In 1866 he brought his Italian bride home to meet his parents.

In 1868 he competed against thirty-six other artists and won a commission to decorate the tomb of President Abraham Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois. He was paid seventy thousand dollars for this work, which took fifteen years to complete. Toward the end of his life, Larkin was elected an honorary professor at the Academy of Arts in Florence, where Michelangelo, the great Renaissance sculpter and painter, had taught.

For the 1876 centennial, which celebrated the nation's first one hundred years, Larkin made another statue of Ethan Allen. Today this statue stands in Statuary Hall in the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C., where you can visit it.

VOCABULARY

expression - the look on a face
figure - body
represent - to look like
workmanship - the skill of a workman
rarely - not often
sculpture - a work of art carved or shaped from wood, stone, clay or other materials
foundry - workshop where metal is cast
surrounding - encircling or bordering
survive - to live on
commission - a contract to carry out a job
symbolize - to stand for
dramatic - exciting
bust - statue of head and shoulders
Renaissance - period in European history during 1400s-1600s famous for rebirth of art