

Port Chester man shaped Rushmore

By Robert Marchant
Staff Writer

When the nation celebrates the 50th anniversary of Mount Rushmore on July 4, it will also honor a Port Chester man who put his heart and soul into the colossal monument carved out of the Black Hills of South Dakota.

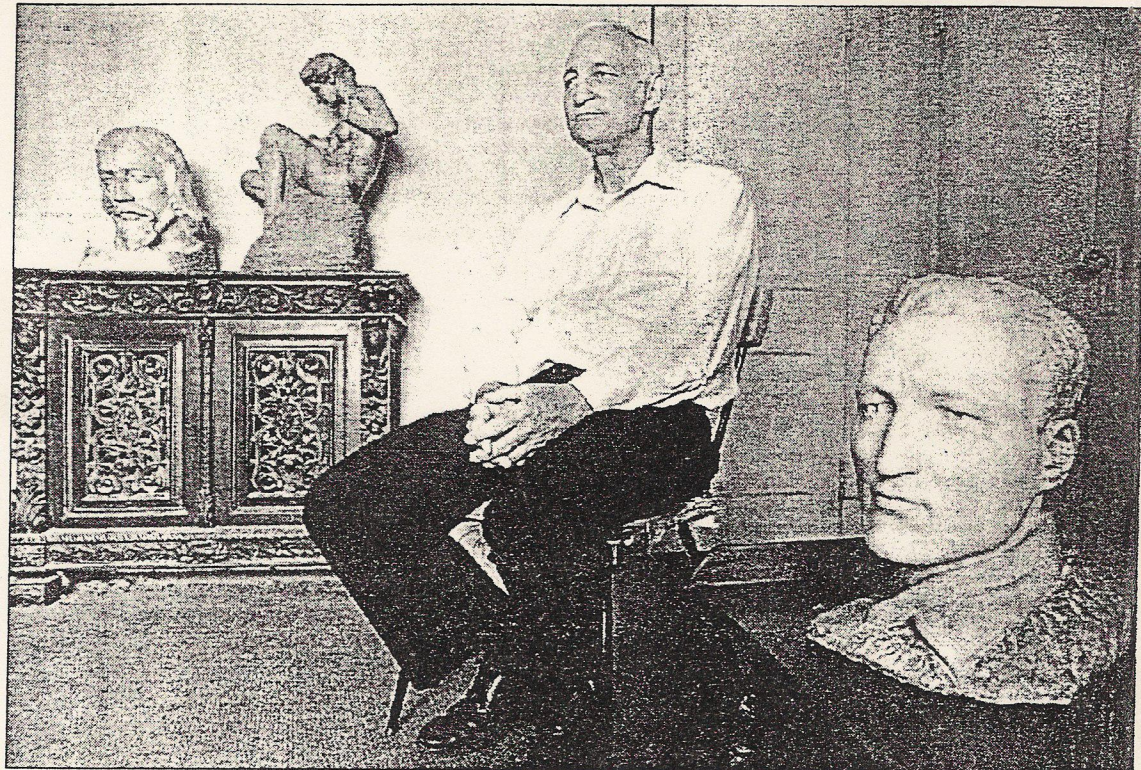
People still remember the master stone cutter and carver, Luigi Del Bianco, in his adopted village on the Byram River, and evidence of his artistry is visible in every corner of Port Chester.

But his crowning achievement as an old world craftsman — he was trained in Venice and Vienna — was one of the man-made wonders of the West: the giant likenesses of four American presidents, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, on a mountainside near Rapid City. About two million people visit the monument every year, according to the National Park Service.

As head carver on the project between 1933 through 1940, when most of the work was completed with dynamite and drills, Del Bianco was responsible for the final finish on the stone heads, "the refinement of expression" as the mastermind of Mount Rushmore, Gutzon Borglum, called it. Borglum and Bianco, as everyone called him, had collaborated on a number of large projects together in the sculptor's Stamford, Conn., studio when he chose the Italian-born stone master to work as head carver at Rushmore.

Bianco taught and supervised the carvers at Rushmore, most of them out-of-work miners, in the arduous but extremely precise job of molding the granite into human forms.

The importance of the job was evident in a letter Borglum sent to his business manager which Bianco's son, Caesar, has a copy of. "Bianco



Staff photo/Steve Schmitt

Caesar Del Bianco, with works by his sculptor-stone cutter father, Luigi. At right is a bust of his father.

is back, and his presence emphasizes the frightful handicap this work labors under," Borglum wrote. "He (Bianco) is the only intelligent, efficient, stone carver on the work who understands the language of the sculptor."

Bianco, who settled in Port Chester in 1908, did his job so well that the faces are clearly visible 25 miles away. He also patched up a fissure in Jefferson's lip in 1940 so that it was virtually undetectable.

Caesar Del Bianco is happy the anniversary will be commemorated with fanfare and hopes his father will receive some of the credit he has not always received in the past. The Postal Service is issuing a stamp commemorating Mount Rushmore, and the 50th anniversary ceremony will be televised live on NBC.

On the local level, the Port Chester Historical Association will print

a set of limited edition commemorative envelopes to accompany the new stamps. And Caesar Del Bianco will give a lecture about Rushmore and his father at the Port Chester Public Library on June 17.

He became an expert on the Rushmore project after he read a book about it five years ago. He was surprised to find that the book, "The Carving of Mount Rushmore," did not contain a single reference to his father. "It's like talking about the '36 Yankees and not mentioning DiMaggio," he said. Not to diminish Borglum or any of the other men who made the grandiose scheme a reality, he said he only hoped the historical record would note the vital role his father played.

The son recalls his father as being an outgoing, boisterous man "who was strong as an ox." After a long day's work, he would head to his garage after dinner and carve gravestones from Vermont marble.

He also sculpted his own artwork.

He was a man who put his all in whatever job was at hand. He told the Port Chester Daily Item in 1966, two years before his death, "I'd do it again, even knowing all the hardships involved. I could work at Mount Rushmore even without pay, if necessary. It was a great privilege granted me."

For the July 4 festivities, Caesar and his brother, Vincent, of Port Chester, and their sister, Gloria Del Bianco of Los Angeles, will travel to the Black Hills to see their father's greatest achievement.

For Caesar Del Bianco, 59, it will be the first time he has seen the mountain since he was a child. The giant faces of the presidents draw the crowds, but the son will have the satisfaction of knowing that it was Bianco, the headstrong stone master of Port Chester, who will be immortalized in their faces, as well.