

Mount Rushmore's forgotten man

It's been said that Luigi Del Bianco put the soul in the granite faces of the four presidents on Mount Rushmore.

An Italian immigrant classically trained in the tradition of Michelangelo, he was the monument's chief carver, which meant that much of the finer elements of the massive sculpture were left to him. "I know every line and ridge, each small bump and all the details of that head so well," Del Bianco told the Yonkers Herald Statesman in 1966.

The interview occurred three years before his death at age 76 in Port Chester, where he owned a marble-cutting shop that turned out cemetery headstones. Decades of inhaling silica dust (he never wore a protective mask) took a toll. Dying of lung disease, Del Bianco was a martyr to his art.

Gutzon Borglum, the brilliant impresario of Mount Rushmore, all but said that Del Bianco was indispensable to the Depression-era project, which draws more than two million visitors a year to the Black Hills of South Dakota. Borglum wrote of his chief carver, "He is worth more than any 3 (sic) men in America for this particular type of work."

The work included literally saving a face, which he did by ingeniously filling a crack in Jefferson's lip with a slab of granite. The pay was \$1.50 an hour, but despite the hardships, Del Bianco said he would've worked for nothing for the privilege.

And yet only a handful of people apparently know



Phil Reisman

Watch Phil Reisman on "The Phil Reisman Show" at 12:30 p.m. Thursdays on lohud.com.

anything about him and his contribution to the creation of a majestic national landmark.

Books about Mount Rushmore leave him out entirely. The National Park Service gives Del Bianco next to nothing in the way of recognition beyond a plaque that lists his name and those of more than 400 other workers.

Del Bianco was all but erased from history, an injustice that rankles his grandson, Lou Del Bianco, a professional storyteller who lives in Port Chester and was 6 years old when the chief carver died.

"Because I was his only grandson, when we visited him every Sunday, the red carpet was rolled out for me," Del Bianco recalled. "I can still remember the way he hugged me and the way he said, 'I am Luigi and you are Luigi.'"

He has devoted much of his time to setting the record straight about his grandfather — an effort that's been aided by the publication of Douglas J. Gladstone's book, "Carving a Niche for Himself: The



Lou Del Bianco with bust of his grandfather Luigi Del Bianco, chief carver of Mount Rushmore.

Untold Story of Luigi Del Bianco."

In the book, Gladstone notes the park service's uneasiness about singling out any one individual for credit. This comes under the old sports credo that there is no "I" in team.

Gladstone posits an even darker reason for Del Bianco's marginalization: ethnic prejudice. On this, he quotes Jim Sapione, a family friend and former Rye town supervisor.

"It's very simple," Sapione said. "Luigi wasn't given the credit he was due because of a bias against Italian-Americans, because of bigotry."

For now, Del Bianco will have to settle for a dedication ceremony June 21 in Port Chester. A plaque of Luigi Del Bianco will be unveiled. Included in the design will be the image of Mount Rushmore, the epitome of the American dream.

Reach Phil Reisman at preisman@lohud.com. Twitter: [@philreisman](https://twitter.com/philreisman).