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In this rare color photograph supplied by Lincoln Borglum's daughter, Robin Borglum Carter, Luigi Del Bianco is shown working on Abraham Lincoln's left eye. Photo courtesy of Borglum Archives

# LUIGI DEL BIANCO: A MONUMENTAL LIFE

**DOUG GLADSTONE SHARES AN EXTRACT FROM HIS  
NEW BOOK ON THE LIFE OF LUIGI DEL BIANCO,  
CHIEF CARVER OF MOUNT RUSHMORE**

*The Mount Rushmore National Memorial was a labor of love for sculptor and designer Gutzon Borglum. But in the recently released *Carving a Niche for Himself; The Untold Story of Luigi Del Bianco and Mount Rushmore* (Bordighera Press, 2014), author Douglas J. Gladstone focuses the spotlight not on Borglum, but rather on the obscure Italian American immigrant who served as chief carver of the monument from 1933 through 1940.*

*Though Borglum's own correspondence in the Library of Congress clearly attests to his importance, Del Bianco, for some inexplicable reason, has never received the credit in scholarly publications or documentaries on the creation of the memorial that many individuals believe he is deserving of.*

*A native of Meduno in the Province of Pordenone, Del Bianco died on 20 January 1969 of accelerated silicosis that was brought on, in part, by his years of not wearing a mask while working at the monument.*

*In this exclusive book excerpt, Gladstone recounts what it was like for the Del Bianco family when Luigi brought his wife and three sons to join him in Keystone, South Dakota in 1935, and later chronicles the efforts of one of those sons, Caesar, and grandson, Lou, to prove that Del Bianco was the glue that held the project together.*

When work began at Mount Rushmore, it was actually another Italian immigrant and stone cutter named Hugo Villa who was the chief carver. Among his works, he designed the statue of Henry Smith, the first American Governor of Texas, that sits in the East Coast Texas town of Brazoria. He was also responsible for the Pioneer Monument in Landa Park, which is located in New Braunfels, Texas. Funded by German-Americans throughout Texas, the statue depicts a German immigrant pioneer family.

After the partially completed bust of George Washington was unveiled on July 4, 1930, Borglum assigned Villa to complete the carving of Washington. His next task was to be his undoing — the sculpting of Thomas Jefferson's face.

In the book, *The Carving of Mount Rushmore*, author Rex Allen Smith notes that the process of sculpting Jefferson's head was to be "...a colossal disaster in the making." According to Smith, Villa inspected the area where Jefferson's head was to be carved, and emerged with concerns about the inferior quality of the granite on that side of the mountain. But Borglum overruled Villa, who began to sculpt Jefferson at Borglum's instructions.

Afterwards, Borglum was so upset with the way Jefferson's face turned out that his original vision of where Jefferson would be located on the mountain had to be jettisoned. For doing what he was told and heeding Borglum's directions, Villa was summarily fired.

When Del Bianco was hired by Borglum in 1933 to replace Villa as chief carver, one of the first things he was instructed to do was dynamite the bust of Jefferson off the mountain before starting anew.

Two years later, Del Bianco brought his family out to the Black Hills of South Dakota to live with him in the town of Keystone.

Del Bianco's wife, Nicoletta Cardarelli, had misgivings about the trip almost from the get-go. For starters, in the days before interstate highways and commercial air travel, it usually took Luigi six days to make the drive from Port Chester to South Dakota, according to a published account.

In a 1933 letter that Borglum's wife, Mary, sent to Luigi, he is advised to make the trip by car by going via Philadelphia. Mrs. Borglum estimated that the cost of the journey would be \$75 for maintenance of the vehicle, and \$40 for gas.

Perhaps more significantly, Nicoletta was concerned that leaving for Keystone meant uprooting her three young children — Caesar, Vincent and Silvio — from Port Chester and taking them cross country to a place where Italian-Americans were not exactly found in abundance.

Even today, Italian-Americans represent only one percent of the total population of South Dakota, according to the United States Census Bureau. Only 714 people reside in Keystone and, of those, less than one percent — 0.75% — classify themselves as Italian-Americans.

According to the United States Census Bureau, there were about 5,000 identifiable Italian immigrants in the United States in 1850. Over the next three decades, a total of 64,361 Italians immigrated to America. Political upheaval in their homeland is generally given as the reason why they up and left their native soil.

As with most groups who came to these shores, the lure of a better life most likely spurred them to leave their homeland.

In spite of the numbers of Italian immigrants coming to the United States, most didn't choose to put down stakes in South Dakota. The immigrants who did



Luigi Del Bianco and some of the Native Americans he befriended when he resided in Keystone, SD, circa 1935. Courtesy of the Del Bianco Family Collection

choose South Dakota were mostly Norwegian, with a smattering of Czech but, in actuality, the most widespread of all the ethnic groups to South Dakota were the Germans.

In *Dakota Resources: A Preliminary Guide for Studying Ethnic Groups in South Dakota*, Gerald F. DeJong examines in excruciating detail the Fourteenth Census of the United States. He found that, in 1920, of South Dakota's total population of 636,547, just 82,574 (13%) were foreign born.

Of those 82,574, 413 individuals identified themselves as Italian. Care to guess how many Italians settled in Pennington County, where Keystone is?

All of thirteen.

No, if you were an Italian immigrant in South Dakota, the place to go was Lawrence County — more than 50 percent (262) of all the Italians living in the state in 1920 settled there.

So you can just imagine Nicoletta's reaction upon arriving in South Dakota; like Dorothy Gale, who found herself asking her dog, Toto, where they were

after a tornado thrust them both out of the Kansas plains and deposited them in Munchkinland, the matriarch of the Del Bianco family might have turned to one of her sons and exclaimed, "Silvio, I have a feeling we're not in Port Chester, anymore."

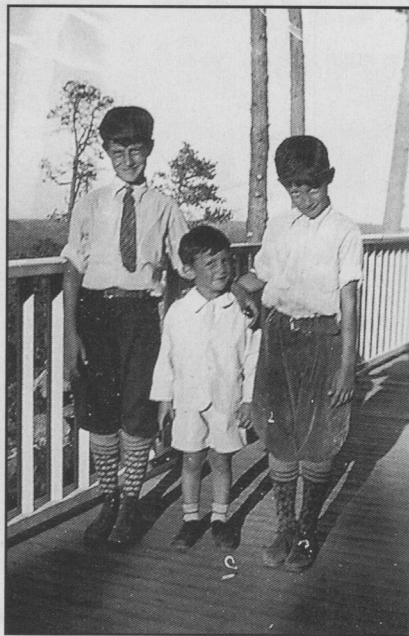
But it was more than just finding a fellow Italian to relate to. According to the Keystone Historical Society, Nicolletta experienced culture shock almost immediately when she discovered that the rental house where they lived, behind the Keystone Trading Post, didn't have indoor plumbing. Also, she was unable to buy the necessary ingredients at the Keystone Trading Company to prepare the family's favorite Italian dishes. The family never returned after 1935 and, starting that year, Luigi roomed and boarded in a boarding house at the foot of Mount Rushmore during his remaining time in the Black Hills.

Due to a lack of funding, work at the monument came to screeching halts quite often. Even Lincoln Borglum admits that his father grossly underestimated the

costs of the project. In *Mount Rushmore: The Story Behind the Scenery*, Lincoln writes that Gutzon estimated that the memorial would cost about \$400,000 and take four years to complete. As it turned out, the project actually cost just a shade under \$1 million (\$989,992.32 to be exact) and work was done sporadically over a span of 14 years.

In his father's defense, Lincoln argued that there was no real way of knowing how much the project would actually cost, because there was no comparable work on which to base estimates.

The shutdowns prompted Del Bianco to quit twice, first in 1935, and then five years later, in 1940. Otherwise, he stayed six months at a time in South Dakota.



From left, Silvio, Caesar and Vincent Del Bianco — Luigi's three sons — when they lived in Keystone, South Dakota.

*Courtesy of the Del Bianco Family Collection*



Luigi Del Bianco in Gutzon Borglum's studio at Mount Rushmore with the models for George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Notice the torso and full dress on Washington; Borglum had originally planned to make Rushmore more than just the four faces, but lack of funding, skilled laborers and faulty rock precluded that.

*Courtesy of the Del Bianco Family Collection*

For his efforts, Luigi was reportedly paid \$1.50 an hour or \$72 per week. With the notable exception of Villa, who received \$20 per day — Borglum personally defrayed half of that amount — nobody else ever earned more.

As for Lou's uncles, their experiences were apparently far more pleasant than their mother's. "I remember the general store in town and a bar across the street which had a boxing ring in the back," Caesar wrote years later. "Even today I found it humorous and strange that there was a boxing ring there."

The children of the workers all attended school in the one-room Keystone Schoolhouse, which is now occupied by the Keystone Historical Museum. Years later, the adult Vincent would fondly recall his days in Keystone, and the friendships the Del Biancos made with the Lakota Indians.

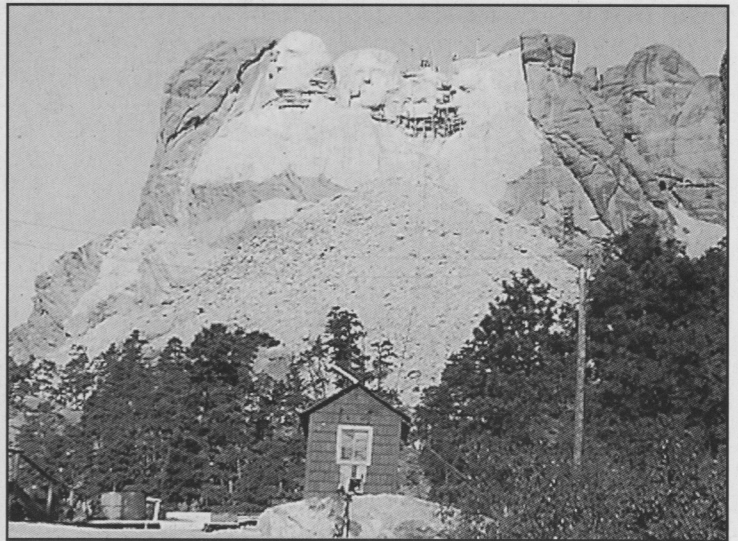
"My brothers and I (the oldest Del Bianco child, Theresa, had died at the age of four from meningitis, while one other daughter, Gloria, had not been born yet) were at their reservation all the time, cutting our fingers and becoming blood brothers with them," he told reporter Yvette Kahn in 1991. "My father became a blood brother with their chief."

"One of the reasons they all got along so well was that they were all foreigners," says Lou, who was the third youngest of Vincent's seven children but his only son. "The Indians were foreigners and so was my grandfather."

"I saw the house where I lived, the stream where I went fishing, the woods where I played and that old schoolhouse," said Vincent, who went back to the Black Hills in July 1991 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Mount Rushmore. "It was very moving."



LEFT: Luigi Del Bianco and a relative, Luigia Del Bianco, outside of his home in Meduno, Italy on one of his many trips back to the Province of Pordenone. Meduno is located about 40 miles northwest of Trieste. *Courtesy of Del Bianco Family Collection*  
 RIGHT: A partially completed Mount Rushmore, circa 1938. Work at that time was primarily focused on the Theodore Roosevelt sculpture. *Courtesy of the Del Bianco Family Collection*



## SETTING THINGS STRAIGHT

It was the simple failure of Smith's book to mention Del Bianco that started Lou and his late uncle, Caesar, on the journey to champion Luigi's contributions and rewrite history.

For his book, Smith interviewed many of the men who actually worked on the mountain. But when Luigi's son, Caesar, read the book and discovered that his father hadn't been interviewed, he almost blew a gasket, according to Lou.

"He told me, 'It's like talking about the 1936 New York Yankees and not mentioning Joe DiMaggio,'" recalls Lou. "My Uncle Caesar was very passionate about his Papa's contribution to Mount Rushmore, and very serious about the serious omission of his father from many of the published books about Rushmore."

So Caesar and Lou set out three times, in 1989, 1990 and 1991, for our nation's capital to discover for themselves the exact role that Luigi played in the carving of Mount Rushmore.

"If I remember correctly, Louis

and I left rather early, around 5AM," wrote Caesar years later. "It was a nice trip and we had plenty of (Frank) Sinatra tapes."

What they found was a real eye-opener, according to Lou. "Caesar hit the mother load," he says. "He found amazing stuff."

In the Library of Congress's manuscript division, Caesar found the collected papers of Gutzon Borglum. All told, there were approximately 190 boxes of information, covering Borglum's life and career.

Thirty of these boxes were just about Mount Rushmore.

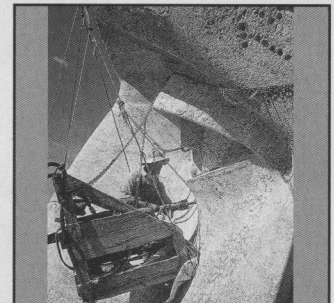
"You have no idea how excited I was anticipating what I would find in them," wrote Caesar. "It was such a great feeling to find letters, memos, etc., all about my father."

"Caesar continued to make great finds with every trip we made to D.C. together," says Lou. "This research was the highlight of his life."

Borglum's papers put to rest once and for all any lingering doubt of the important role that Luigi played in the carving of Mount Rushmore. *LM*



For details on ordering Doug Gladstone's book, please see the ad on our outside back cover of this magazine.



Carving a Niche for Himself  
 The Untold Story of Luigi Del Bianco

Douglas J. Gladstone

Illustration: J. Papp

**DOUGLAS J. GLADSTONE** is a journalist by training, whose published articles have appeared in *The Chicago Sun Times*, *The Burlington Free Press* and *America in World War 2 Magazine*, among others. His new book, about the Italian-American immigrant who served as the chief carver of the Mount Rushmore National Memorial, can be ordered by contacting Small Press Distribution in California.