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HISTORY | 16TH PRESIDENT'S 200TH BIRTHDAY HAS SPECIAL MEANING



Tania Savayan/The Journal News

Lou Del Bianco of Port Chester, a storyteller and actor, is photographed next to a mosaic of Abraham Lincoln made by Luigi Del Bianco, his grandfather. His grandfather, an Italian immigrant, was the chief carver of Lincoln's face on Mount Rushmore. Lou Del Bianco impersonates Lincoln in a traveling show for children.



Courtesy of Lou Del Bianco

Luigi Del Bianco, an Italian immigrant from Port Chester, is seen with a model of Mount Rushmore. Del Bianco was a stone carver who reproduced the face of Lincoln on the mountain.

Family has tradition of bringing Lincoln to life

Leah Rae
The Journal News

For all the tourists who have stared up at Mount Rushmore over the years, watching Abraham Lincoln's eyes catch the light, few have heard the story about the Italian immigrant from Port Chester who had a hand in all of that.

Stone carver Luigi Del Bianco used to reel himself down the side of the South Dakota mountain on cables, chipping into the granite after chunks were blown off by dynamite. He worked alongside other men until, over the course of 14 years, the faces of four American presi-



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dents came to life. Inside Lincoln's 10-foot-wide eyes, he fashioned a wedge-shaped pupil, now famous for the way it reflects the sunlight and makes the face seem to change expression.

His descendants love to tell that story,

including his grandson, who just happens to have a Lincoln project of his own.

Lou Del Bianco, 45, is known to a generation of local schoolchildren as "Honest Abe" himself. He is a professional storyteller who strides onto elementary school stages in the full get-up — tall hat, long jacket and strange beard, which he grew for real this year. This being the former president's 200th birthday, his act is in high demand. Children regard him as the historic figure himself, approaching him with questions like: "When did you die?"

"I'm using theater and storytelling to

Please see **LINCOLN, 10A**

Storyteller continues Lincoln tradition

LINCOLN, from 1A

bring Lincoln to life, and my grandfather was using the art of stone carving," Lou Del Bianco said. "I didn't really know my grandfather that well. I know him mostly through family legends and photos and pictures. But there are times when I'm performing and I think about him, because I know that we both share this passion for this person who contributed so much to the history of our country."

Luigi Del Bianco was born in 1892. He studied stone carving in Austria as a boy. He cut stone in Vermont as a new immigrant to the United States. In Port Chester, he married Nicoletta Cardarelli and went to work for the flamboyant sculptor Gutzon Borglum. In the 1930s, he worked for Borglum to carry out South Dakota's wild idea for attracting tourists, a mountain-size monument.

Caesar Del Bianco, Luigi's son, researched his father's role at Mount Rushmore in visits to the Library of Congress. He found records of Borglum praising his chief carver as "worth any three

men I could find in America, for this particular type of work." There are also records of Luigi resigning from time to time, apparently in disputes over pay, and being persuaded to come back by Borglum.

As chief carver, Luigi supervised local stone cutters and dealt with troublesome efforts to carve Thomas Jefferson. The first Jefferson head was blasted off because of problems with the rock. The second was saved despite a fissure in the lip. It was Luigi, his grandson said, who managed to remove and replace a piece of the face.

There are other family stories about spending a summer in South Dakota, and about Nicoletta cooking Italian food for the local Sioux Indians. Lou's father told stories about becoming blood brothers with his Sioux friends as a boy, holding up a scarred thumb to prove it.

In 1966, about three years before he died, Luigi told a reporter that he knew the face of Lincoln better than those of his own friends.

"I know every line and ridge,

each small bump, and all the details of that head so well!" he told The Herald Statesman newspaper at the age of 74. "I'd do it again, even knowing all the hardships involved. I would work at Mount Rushmore, even without pay, if necessary. It was a great privilege granted me."

Lou said he understood his grandfather's fascination.

"I would think any carver would love carving a face like Lincoln's," said Lou, who keeps some of his grandfather's other works in his Port Chester home. One is a black and white mosaic of Lincoln's face. Examples of his grandfather's carvings are scattered around town, particularly in the headstones at St. Mary's Cemetery.

What Lou remembers most is his grandfather reminding him that they were namesakes: "I'm Luigi, you're Luigi."

For the grandson, questions linger: How did it feel as an immigrant from Italy, being part of this gigantic American monument? How was he treated, being an Italian with broken English? How did he feel about carving the images

of presidents on Sioux holy ground? And what about this figure named Borglum?

In his own work, Lou continues to research Lincoln's life and answer questions raised by young audiences. He will perform today at Queens Theatre in the Park in Flushing. Many more requests have come in this month after an endorsement by the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.

Lou adjusts his act depending on the age of his audience, incorporating songs, parables and readings from historic texts. For the older students, he pretends to be getting ready to deliver the Gettysburg address, asking children to repeat his lines in a kind of rehearsal.

One of his favorite questions from a child came after Lincoln described how poor he once was, with three pennies left in his pocket.

"So," a student asked, "who was on the penny?"

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