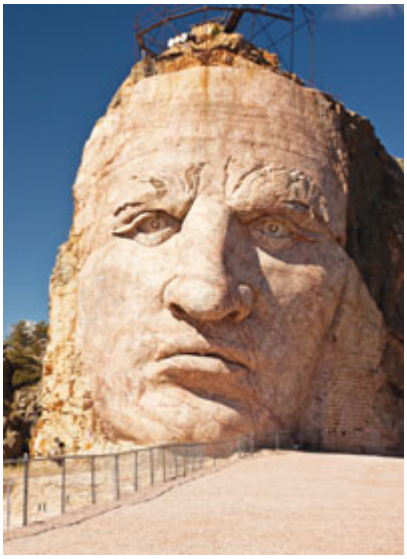
Crazy Horse Memorial: A Tale of Two Stories Told in Stone



Crazy Horse monument, once completed, will be the largest mountain carving in the world. When finished, this three-dimensional carving will stretch 641 feet long and stand 563 feet high. For size perspective of this unprecedented mountain carving, all four granite heads (each 60 feet high) from Mount Rushmore can fit into the head of Crazy Horse, which is almost nine stories tall. The Crazy Horse monument is taller than the Pyramid of Giza (481 feet) and the Washington Monument (555 feet).

The only thing to rival the monumental scale and size of this mountain carving would be the man who had the dream and determination to undertake such a task. For in this stone are two stories: one of the American Indian people and another of the sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski.

A mere 17 miles separate Mount Rushmore and the Crazy Horse Memorial, but their stories couldn't be farther apart. Mount Rushmore took 14 years to complete at a cost of $1 million dollars, of which 85 percent was funded by the government. Crazy Horse is still being sculpted after 60 years. More importantly, the Crazy Horse monument is being built with private donations and accepts no federal funds.

Korczak's Path to Crazy Horse

Born in Boston of Polish descent, Korczak Ziolkowski's path to building the world's largest mountain carving was hard, but one built of character and integrity. He was orphaned at age one and grew up in a series of foster homes. At age 16 he was on his own, working odd jobs and teaching himself to work with plaster and clay, having never received any formal training in art, sculpture, architecture, or engineering. He later moved to West Hartford, Connecticut, where he found success doing commissioned sculpture work throughout New York, Boston, and New England.

In 1939, Korczak's life would change forever as a turn of events would take him from the East to out West. That summer he fulfilled a dream in assisting Gutzon Borglum in carving the Mount Rushmore Memorial in South Dakota. That same year he won first prize at the New York World's Fair for his marble portrait, "PADEREWSKI: Study of an Immortal." This image of the pianist and the politician caught the attention of Lakota (Sioux) Chief Standing Bear, who wrote to Korczak to persuade him to create a lasting memorial to American Indians: "My fellow chiefs and I would like the white man to know the red man has great heroes, also."

They decided to carve a monument rivaling Mount Rushmore, featuring Crazy Horse, a Sioux warrior known for his bravery in battle and service to his people. He led a war party at the Battle of the Little

Bighorn. He was killed at Fort Robinson by an American soldier while under a flag of truce. Crazy Horse died on September 6, 1877; Korczak was born 31 years later on that same day. Many American Indians consider that an omen that he was destined to carve Crazy Horse.

Korczak put Standing Bear's invitation on hold when, at age 34, he volunteered for service in the U.S. Army during World War II. He landed at Omaha Beach in 1944, where he was wounded. On May 3, 1947, he arrived in the Black Hills of South Dakota to begin his life's work. Nearly age 40, he had no budget, no running water, no electricity, and no home. It was just Korczak and the mountain. As a rugged individualist, he wouldn't have it any other way.

Thus began an epic undertaking that would challenge Korczak. In his work he would endure four back operations, quadruple heart bypass surgery, diabetes, arthritis, a broken wrist, and a ruptured Achilles tendon. But never a broken spirit.

Korczak stated in an interview that what kept him motivated in his work was what a wise Indian had said to him, "When the legends die, the dreams end. And when the dreams end, there is no more greatness."

With a blast of explosives that shaved 10 tons of rock off the mountain, the memorial was officially dedicated on June 3, 1948. Five of the nine living participants of the Battle of the Little Bighorn were present. Korczak promised that Crazy Horse would be more than a mountain carving; it would be a non-profit educational and humanitarian project financed by the people and not with government tax money. He also pledged not to take a salary.

From One to Many

"He was a great believer in private enterprise and individual initiative," Ruth Ziolkowski, Korczak's widow and president of the non-profit Crazy Horse Memorial Foundation, said in an interview with Liberty News Network (an affiliate of The John Birch Society).

Korczak's vision was to have Crazy Horse built by the interested public and not the taxpayer. He so strongly believed in the free-market system that he twice turned down $10 million of federal funding. He knew that federal funds would mean federal control over the project. He felt the government would not complete the carving and not carry out its humanitarian goals.

"He saw how Gutzon Borglum struggled at Mount Rushmore and the long periods of time he would spend in Washington trying to get funds," Ruth said. "He [Korczak] said we're a nation of individuals and I believe in private enterprise and if this project is going to be built it's going to be built by the American people."

Korczak also knew the history of the federal government breaking its treaties with the American Indian. He felt that American Indian history was too important to leave in the hands of a federal bureaucracy.

"He also said he wasn't a very good politician. [If] he had to go to Washington to lie to people, he couldn't remember one day from the next what lie he told so he just decided this was the best way to go."

In the early years, Korczak labored alone most of the time on the granite mountain. For the first seven months, he lived in a tent. He built roads, a well, a studio-home, and a 741-step staircase to the mountain top. He did have some volunteers, and one of them was a young Ruth Ross from Connecticut, who arrived on a summer day in June of 1947.

She had first met Korczak at his home in West Hartford, Connecticut. She and other school friends went to his house to get the autograph of a famous actor who was staying with Korczak.

“Korczak was standing over in the corner very much in the background. I honestly don’t remember who, but somebody felt sorry for him and asked him for his autograph. From there on in he started to carve the Noah Webster statue,” she recalled.

She and her school friends mowed lawns and did other work to help raise money for the Noah Webster statue, which Korczak carved as a gift for the city. She, along with other volunteers from West Hartford, followed Korczak to the Black Hills when he began work on the Crazy Horse carving in 1947.

In 1950 on Thanksgiving Day, Korczak and Ruth were married. They raised 10 children, five boys and five girls, at the foot of Crazy Horse.

“It was wonderful when you look back on it. You see what life is now. So it was really fun and the children were a great joy; they really were. Korczak loved children, always had…. [He was] so tickled to have some of his own. He was just happy with the kids. He was a good disciplinarian, great father, wonderful teacher, and he played sports with them on Sunday afternoon. He wanted them to listen to opera; they’d teach him Johnny Cash. It was kind of an offset.”

The mountain carving was no longer a solo project, but now a family affair, and Korczak’s unwavering focus and eccentricity ensured the project didn’t get short shrift.

In an interview with *60 Minutes* in 1977, he exclaimed to Mike Wallace how he told his wife Ruth, “Honey, you see that mountain? Never forget, it comes first. You come second. Now the children know that. They know they come third. That’s a common understanding in the house. I didn’t come out here to marry a woman to have a lot of children. I came out here to carve a mountain!”

Ruth’s response was one of understanding: “His work has to come first or he would be just another person doing, selling insurance or cars or something like that.”

The boys grew up helping their father on the mountain, with the girls assisting Ruth in the ever-expanding visitor complex. The Ziolkowski sons and daughters learned from their parents hard work, special skills of mountain carving, and the vision for Crazy Horse.

Today six of the 10 children are still involved in the project. One daughter not involved in the project, Anne, died, while three others live nearby in Custer.

Two of the children continue to work on the mountain itself, while four others work in the visitor center. Two of the children also serve on the foundation board.

“Casimir works up there. Monique works up there. Adam works down here most of the time. The other girls work here and help me,” Ruth said.

When Korczak passed away on October 20, 1982, at age 74, Ruth assumed the leadership of directing the project. Since the Ziolkowskis today have nine children, 23 grandchildren, and 13 great-grandchildren, the continuity of the vision for Crazy Horse is intact.

“All ten of our youngsters went out and tried something else and came back because each one wanted to, and the three that didn’t [come back], eventually ended up in Custer anyway,” Ruth explained.

In 2007, the Ziolkowski family entered a new phase, with the first member of the third generation joining the mountain carving.

"When you have the grandchildren, they have to live their own lives. A lot of them have worked at Crazy Horse in the summer. It's a great place to cook, wait tables, or work in the gift shop and they do. We had two grandsons, two oldest grandsons actually, one of them worked on the mountain for one year," said Ruth.

Many people see the story of the Ziolkowski family to be just as compelling as that of the North American Indian tribes. Many visitors appreciate the family-values aspect of the project when visiting the memorial.

"So many of them [visitors] will comment on the family part of it because the American family is a wonderful institution. So someone said Crazy Horse and your family takes the place of the family farm. You got a job for everybody, you don't have to make one," said Ruth.

Casimir is perhaps the child who most identifies with his father, working on the carving as the mountain foreman. He knows the importance of carrying on Korc-zak's dream. "When you give your word to do something you follow through on it no matter what," he told an interviewer one time.

A Big Dream

Korczak's dream wasn't just to build a colossal mountain carving. He wanted it to be a humanitarian project. He wanted to tell present and future generations the story of the North American Indians. He wanted to tell it in stone.

This is reflected in Korczak's depiction of Crazy Horse, which shows the Sioux warrior with his left arm extended, finger pointed, and declaring proudly, "My lands are where my dead lie buried" — a response Crazy Horse gave when a trader taunted him, asking, "Where are your lands?"

That story of the Indian is being told in three major areas: the mountain carving in progress, the Indian Museum of North America, and the Indian University of North America and Medical Training Center. In 1949, the non-profit Crazy Horse Memorial Foundation was established to accomplish these goals.

The Indian University of North America was launched in 2010 with the completion of a student living and learning center and the start of a summer university program through a partnership with the University of South Dakota. The Crazy Horse university program is open to Native Americans and non-natives. Twenty students enrolled that inaugural year.

"There were Indian young people [from] as far away as Alaska, Arizona, New Mexico, North Dakota and South Dakota. They represented thirteen tribes and every one of those young people are in school today," Ruth explained.

In 2011, 20 students were enrolled at the Indian University of North America, and 18 went on to transfer to an accredited four-year university.

Between paid internships and accredited classes, students may earn up to 12 academic credits that can be counted toward their degrees in other schools.

"One of the young men stayed here and worked so he could go to the school in January and have enough money to do it," Ruth said.

The Indian Museum of North America was established to complement the story being told in stone on the mountain. It is a repository of the American Indian past, and of the present.

"I always say there are two types of education at Crazy Horse. One is for the students who come and learn. The other is for the other cultures who come in from these doors and learn about the American

Indian," Ruth continued. "We are trying to tell the story of the Indian people [and] of their pride of the wonderful way of life they had before we came and changed their whole manner of living by taking over their land."

Programs and the Passage of Time

From the first blast in 1948 in which 10 tons was removed, to June 3, 1998, the 50th anniversary of the memorial, progress on the carving has been slow. The anniversary marked the completion of Crazy Horse's face. But before Korczak passed away he cautioned his wife and children to "go slowly, so you do it right."

Every year hundreds of thousands of visitors watch the progress and wonder, will it be finished?

"Absolutely! There's no question," Ruth said.

Since 2007, the carving has been propelled somewhat more rapidly though a generous $5 million matching-donation challenge by Sioux Falls philanthropist T. Denny Sanford. That gift is targeted to work on the 219-foot high horse's head. For every dollar given, Sanford gives a dollar.

Ruth stated confidently, "The mountain carving itself definitely will be completed … [but] really the reason for it [the carving] in a sense, is building a university, a medical training center and the museum, which we have the beginning of, for the Indian people of North America. When did you ever see a university that was finished? I mean they always have another building, another something to build or add, but the mountain, yes, very definitely, but when? I have no idea."

Now 85 years old, Ruth Ziolkowski has worked tirelessly for 64 years, including 29 years after the death of Korczak, to keep the dream alive. She knows she won't live to see Crazy Horse finished in her lifetime.

"Korczak said if it stops because he died his life would have been wasted," she said. "Nothing is impossible. We put a man on the moon for heaven's sake, carving a mountain, we ought to be able to do that."

It's been said that a painter adds to a canvas while the sculptor takes away. Each day as dynamite blasts away rocks from the mountain, the story of the American Indian people and the Ziolkowski family is being unfolded.

Perhaps Korczak summed up the meaning of Crazy Horse when he said, "I'm a storyteller. I'm a storyteller in stone. When Standing Bear asked me to tell their story of their great chief who was killed many years ago, I wanted to tell the story of the North American Indian. I want to right a little of the wrong that they did to these people because this is part of American history."

Korczak Ziolkowski is buried at the base of the mountain. On the tomb door he wrote his own epitaph:

KORCZAK

Storyteller in Stone

May His Remains Be Left Unknown

Photo at top: Sam Antonio

information, click here.