

Who was Solon Borglum? - taken from "Solon H. Borglum – A Man Who Stands Alone" written by his son-in-law, A. Mervyn Davies.

James M. Borglum, a woodcarver in Denmark and a Mormon immigrated to Utah in 1864 with his new bride, Ida Mikkelson, followed by Ida's family, as they were Mormons also. The following year James also married Ida's youngest sister Christina. She had 2 sons.....John Gutzon, March 25, 1867 (the family always called him Johnnie) and a year and a half later Solon Hannibal was born December 22, 1868. After 3 years of emotional pressures between the two sisters, by mutual consent Christina left the family and rejoined to her parents later remarried. She never stayed in touch with the Borglum family so her where about is unknown . While the boy were still very young James Borglum family changed religions and moved to Fremont NE. Eventually Ida had 4 boys and 3 girls, they raised all 9 children as one family.

It became apparent that Nebraska's treeless plains needed physicians more than they needed a woodcarver. So James studied medicine until he received his M.D. degree at the Missouri Medical (homeopathic) College in St. Louis, February 19, 1874.

Now Dr. James Miller Borglum hung out his first shingle in Fremont, NE. Solon was a happy boy and had a passion for the outdoor and for horses and was the only member of his family to really appreciate fully the advantages of a stable full of horses, which the country doctor maintained. Solon learned to ride before he could walk.

He was positively enthusiastic over his first paid job, that was for an early morning paper route. All his earnings went to his father.

The doctor made long wearisome drives making the rounds of scattered ranches and cabins, he would take one of his boys to care for the horse and hold the reins as they drove over the prairie, often far into the night. When it was Solon's turn, he not only acted as groom for the horse and companion for his father, he soon qualified as his assistant, unaware that he was preparing himself for his life on the plains. He was acquiring the skills of a practical nurse and witnessing the facts of life...birth, physical suffering, and death. He developed a proficiency in attending a newborn infant. He also accompanied his father to Indian tepees and sharing the companionship of their children, sometimes staying overnight.

1882 at the age of 15 Johnnie Gutzon knew what he wanted to do with his life. He wanted to be an artist and paint. He left Nebraska for Los Angeles's Art school. From there he moved to Paris France.

His younger brother, Solon, also knew exactly what he wanted to do with his life. He wanted to be a rancher but he had to finish his year of high school at Creighton College in Omaha.

So in 1883 when Solon was 15, for his schooling he spent the year on his father's ranch in California. This trip yielded an extended period of freedom in the land. He learned a trade, became an old hand with the lasso. But he still had to learn the serious business of large-scale ranching and managing his own ranch. He was able to persuade his father to let him go back to NE and develop the recently acquired 640 acres in the sandhills. He, unlike all his brothers, had resolved that he would be happy becoming a cowboy rancher. Dr. Borglum had traded land that he had in California for a Loup Valley Ranch, in South Loup township on Section 17 which is 4 miles west of Cairo on the North side of Highway #2.

One hot summer's day in 1885 Solon, a 16 ½ year old prospector could be seen crossing the treeless, trackless plains of Nebraska's sandhill country, seated in an old, creaky wagon, driven by a tired horse while a still tired cow plodded behind. This youthful pioneer was resolved to set up a cattle ranch on virgin land.....Life south of the Loup River began to take shape as the young ranchman established his home and recruited helpers,...At this point Solon's plans might have been crashed had he not found among these men a foreman, dependable Joe Andrews.....Together he and his foreman dug the well, planted the corn, cut the wild grass for hay, built a dugout for a home and one for the animals with a corral..... bought a minimum of stock and he was in business.....

Several hundred cottonwood trees were planted as windbreaks, for shade and for a touch of beauty a circle of dark pink flowers, Rocky Mountain Bee Plant that came up every year in front of the dugout. At first the rancher was not seen by anyone.....His days were fully occupied with his "boys" his horses and his herd, except on rare occasions when supplies had to be fetched from Cairo, the nearest town.

1887 – At the age of 19, Solon's interest in art showed when his brother youngest Frank, aged 8, was sent to the ranch by his father to recuperate from a serious illness..... knowing that Solon was a good nurse.....Solon helped the boy to wile away the time sketching.....Earlier Solon sent his older brother Johnnie Gutzon money to pay for his art lessons.

1887 - Solon Borglum (19 yrs. old) signed himself in as a student in the White Cloud sod school that was located south of his dugout and he was in school for the next 2 years.

Each year Spring arrived with its eternal promise.....but at the season's end Solon had nothing to report to impress his concerned father.....Yet, unfailingly, he would greet the oncoming season with a new burst of enthusiasm....."Next year will be different..."He loved ranch life so much.....

1890 – On Johnnie Gutzon way to France he stopped to see Solon and told him that he need to become an artist and leave the ranch.

1890 - At the age of 22, Solon was looked upon as a veteran by his new neighbors and they elected him sheriff.....

Solon once wrote an article for the Youth's Companion on "Our Vanishing Types" in which one of the types was the sheriff.....The sheriff has been portrayed as a blood thirsty daredevil.....Actually he is almost always a daredevil, almost never bloodthirsty.....invariably good-natured and brave.....not a boaster,.....His pride was to go out and take a desperado single-handed and without bloodshed....."

The cowboy was viewed in a similar light.....who is the most misrepresented of all the "vanishing types".....The people of the East have been led by ignorant or careless writers, painters, and sculptors to confuse him with the cattle "rustler" or raider.....he has been pictured as a desperado, going about "shooting up" towns and leaving a trail of carnage behind.....Also a deep impression was made on the settler during the winter month with the blizzards of 1887 and 1888.....which is a recurrent theme of Solon's art.....

1890-1893 - Solon remains on the ranch but goes to Omaha from time to time to take lessons with the painter J. Laurie Wallace.

February 7, 1891 was the date that Solon at the age of 23 sketched the "Snow Drift Scene".....one of his dug out and the windmill and the other of the dug out for the cattle with a corral.....Copies of these were given to me by Solon's daughter along with the 2 books of his life written by his son-in-law which are at the Cairo Roots and the Stuhr Museum.

Long before Gutzon did Mt. Rushmore, Solon sculpt a huge face "The Face" on the East side of the bluffs, northwest of Cairo. In 1963 Pete Siek told me that in 1906 at the age of 16 he remembers seeing it. Maybe that is where Gutzon got his idea for Mt. Rushmore.

Gutzon wrote that, " school life separated us, and I did not meet Solon again until on my return from France in 1894. He was running a ranch in Western Nebraska. Through his letters I had been greatly impressed with his abilities of observation of the animal life about him. He knew nothing about art....but his unconventional trained eye saw what the camera did and recorded group activity in the same way. On scraps of wrapping paper he had recorded movements of horses, steer and lesser animals of the prairie. I pleaded with him to give up his ranch and join me in California."

Solon worked hard and was succeeding as a rancher with a hobby of doing artwork when a series of blizzards actually wiped out the open range.....many ranchers lost half their herds.....Then he was ready leave the Plains, but never would he abandon this close-knit relationships. He would never forget what he had learned. He would relate these experiences – they would be called "anecdotes" – through his work as a sculptor.

Solon goes with Gutzon to California....BUT.....Very little of this period survived except the fact that the plan DID NOT work out and Solon left California and went to Cincinnati then from there he went to France to Study Art.

1895 – Solon, at 27, had exhibition of his sculpture.....His master tells him “You are lucky! You lived.....You had something to say before you studied art”..... Many of his paintings and bronze sculptures were in the Old West style, inspired by his life on the ranch. They earned him the nickname of “The Sculptor of the Prairie“. After all this fame for Solon , Gutzon decided to study and became a sculptor instead of a painter.

In Paris, Solon met and married Emma, December 10, 1898 at the age of almost 30, and 6 months later they left on their honeymoon to spend the summer in South Dakota, visiting the Sioux Indians, whom Solon dearly loved.

1903 -Gutzon became the 2nd Borglum sculptor.....following in his younger brother, Solon’s foot steps.....

1904 - It is said that Solon Borglum was “probably the most original sculptor that this nation has produced”...

Not just an artist, Solon Borglum was also a soldier. He earned the Croix de Guerre, a French medal for valor, during World War I. Shortly after the war, In 1922, Solon died in Stamford, Conn. Following an operation for appendicitis, his power of resistance was fatally lowered by the two gas wounds he received in the war.

Solon’s name came up again in 1935, when the Omaha World-Herald asked three Nebraska historians to individually compile a list of posthumous Nebraskan’s who should be honored for a prospective state Hall of Fame. The three historians all listed four men who are now in the hall of fame. Two of those three historians also listed Solon Borglum as a worthy candidate. The actual Nebraska Hall of Fame was not established until 1961. Currently, neither Solon Borglum nor his brother, Gutzon Borglum are members. Perhaps someday one of those influential prairie sculptor brothers will be on the list