Sculptor vied for Chief Solano job

By Jerry Bowen

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A short article in the May 10, 1934 Solano Republican stated, “Chief Solano To Be Honored June 3 - In one of California’s first gestures to the Indian, the 12-foot tall bronze statue of Chief Solano by William Gordon Huff, made possible by a state appropriation in 1933, will be unveiled at out-of-door ceremonies, where he will grace the top of a beautiful knoll north of the Highway (U.S. 40), four miles west of Fairfield, Sunday, June 3, at 2 p.m.”

So who was William Gordon Huff and how was he selected to sculpt the Chief Solano statue that now stands at the entrance to the old Fairfield library?

He was born Feb. 3, 1903, the fifth of nine children of Thomas and Celia Huff in Fresno, California.

His father was a trail driver on the Chisholm Trail before he moved to Fresno in 1886 where he started up a livery stable.

When William was 15, the family moved to Oakland, where he attended Oakland Technical High School. With scholarships in hand, he attended various art academies in Berkeley, studying under the famed Bennie Bufano, as well as in San Francisco, New York and a year in Paris.

After leaving Paris, he moved to Bennington, Vt., where he received his first major commission to sculpt a monument to the Revolutionary War depicting the Battle of Bennington.

He also had the good fortune to meet his future wife, Doris McIntosh. They were married in 1931 and spent their honeymoon traveling cross-country in a Model A, Ford to Berkeley, where they settled in their new home.

In 1933, a Commission for the California Division of Parks was formed to oversee competition for a statue of Chief Solano. The five-member commission included William E. Colby, Henry W. O’Melveny, Mrs. Edmond N. Brown, Joseph R. Knowland, and Laura E. Gregory.

Huff entered the competition and received the following acknowledgement from the Commission’s secretary, Laura Gregory on Jan. 30, 1933:

“Several sculptors are expecting to submit ideas, and in order to assure absolute impartiality to the contestants it has been decided to assign each sculptor a number, which will be known only to me until after the Park Commission has made its decision. You are therefore kindly requested to place the number ‘15’ somewhere on your model, using no other identifying mark. The model, which should be miniature, must be in my possession at 684 Mills Building not later than noon, Feb. 15, 1933.”

Huff’s submission won the competition and he quickly went to work sculpting the 12-foot version that was cast in bronze by the Jerome Foundry in Oakland.

Before he learned he had won the competition, it is interesting to note that he received a short letter from Dr. A. Kroeber at the University of California Department of Anthropology. In it he said, “Your design strikes me as very dignified. It is also authentic. I have been unable to think of anything appropriate for the left hand: a bow and arrows thus seems indicated if you feel something is needed. The feathers are all right as far as I can see. Good luck to you.”

One can only wonder how the good professor could surmise the statue as being “authentic” since there are no known photographs of Solano. Dr. Platon Vallejo did the only likeness of Chief Solano in bas-relief and it doesn’t look anything like the idealized statue.

The monument was finally completed and the Solano County Band opened the dedication ceremonies with a concert June 3, 1934, followed by a parade of tribes and councils in costume led by the Wahoo Drum Corps of Concord.

Several thousand spectators showed up for the ceremonies that included speeches by Joseph Knowland, editor of the Oakland Tribune and commission member; Dr. Vance Clymer, Sachem of Massasoit Tribe, Improved Order of Red Men; Sen. McCormack of Rio Vista, and Gov. James Rolph Jr.

The long program finally concluded with the unveiling by Mrs. H. Vance Clymer and a community singing of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Solano’s statue remained at the location on a small knoll near the CHP truck scales on today’s Interstate 80 west of Fairfield until 1938. Mindless vandals just couldn’t resist desecrating and damaging the magnificent sculpture so the decision was made to move it to its present location in front of the old library building on the corner of Union and West Texas streets in Fairfield.

The sculpting genius gained further recognition during the 1939 World’s Fair at Treasure Island where he and Ray Strong produced the Paleolithic dioramas of

prehistoric animals and for his own statues flanking the Tower of Sun that thrilled so many visitors until 1940.

But Huff wasn't done with Solano County yet. He teamed up with Rod Rulofson in the 1970s, then curator of the Pena Adobe and Bob Allen of the Vacaville Heritage Council during the restoration of the historic adobe and grounds. The donors' plaque that you can view today is one of his many works.

Terra cotta plaques of Vaca and Pena by Huff also grace the E Clampus Vitus history wall named by the Clampers Wall Of Comparative Ovation at Murphys, California.

I was also surprised to learn that the 60-foot wall depicting an Ichthyosaurus, which I had seen during a trip to the ghost town of Berlin and Ichthyosaurus State Park in Nevada was his work.

Huff's works were a labor of love. The many letters he wrote to Rulofson (located at the Vacaville Heritage Council) show he had many more ideas in the planning stage.

One idea that showed Huff's sense of humor was a suggested sculpture for Solano College with Chief Solano in the center and at the end of stone benches, bas-reliefs of "The Wizard of Rockville" and "The Witch of Birds Landing." Plaques under each relief would have the following captions: "Says the Witch of Birds Landing: In lieu of a love potion, touch my nose three times and your dreams shall be granted - That is if you play your cards right" and "The Wizard of Rockville says: Rub my chin and your power of concentration at examination time will be improved."

The very talented Huff must have been an interesting person to know. Bob Allen still talks of him with great admiration even today.

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