William Gordon Huff: the sculptor of Chief Solano

By Nancy Dingler

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Do you know who sculpted the statue of Chief Solano? This is one of those trivia questions that few can answer. If you came up with the name William Gordon Huff, you are correct.

His name would most likely draw blank stares. William Gordon Huff was a celebrated sculptor who had a keen interest in California history. The 12-foot bronze statue is the one and only statue in California that memorializes one specific Native American.

Huff’s parents came to Fresno from Texas in 1886. Thomas and Celia Huff’s family grew to nine children; only seven reached maturity. William was the fifth child. His dad, Thomas had been a trail driver on the famed Chisom Trail before settling into ownership of a livery stable. In 1918, the family moved to Oakland and then Berkeley.

Huff loved drawing and would, at any opportunity, sketch something. He recalled how he was encouraged by Mr. Ashbrook, a saloon owner, to pursue an art career. The two were waiting for a streetcar to take them to town and to while away the wait, William drew a panorama of wild horses in the dusty ground with a stick. Ashbrook so impressed, remarked, “Billy you are quite an artist. You should study in school.”

This encouragement gave Huff the courage to pursue scholarships for art schools. He earned several scholarships and was able to successively attend art academies at Berkeley, San Francisco, New York and Paris. At Berkeley he studied under the world renown, Benny Bufano.

At the end of his year studying art at the Ecole Grand Chaumiere in Paris, Huff settled in Bennington, Vermont, where he was commissioned to do the commemorative work for the American Revolutionary Battle of Bennington.

During this time, he met Doris McIntosh. Huff had met the young lady while depicting one of her ancestors on horseback. The relationship blossomed. The commission for the famed memorial allowed Doris and Bill to marry in 1931.

The young couple spent their honeymoon in a Model A Ford, touring the country before arriving in Berkeley, where they lived for the next eleven years. Their three children, Toni, Tim and Collin, where born there.
In 1932, Solano County leaders decided that they wanted to erect a statue to the county’s namesake, Chief Francisco Solano, (missionary name) who died in 1850. Joseph Nolan, the editor and owner of the Oakland Tribune got into the act and sponsored a state competition. Huff was one of the 16 or 18 sculptors who competed to make the statue. Huff commented in an interview, “They liked mine the best. Whether it was the best, that was another question.”

The state appropriated $5,000 and the Massasoit Tribe of the Red Men of Fairfield raised $500. It was planned that the statue would be installed on a small knoll across the road from, what is today, the Solano Community College campus.

A close working relationship with the Jerome Foundry in Oakland gave Huff the free space he needed to work on the statue. However, research on Chief Solano was frustrating. There is not a single picture of the chief. Dr. Platon Vallejo rendered the only likeness of Solano in bas-relief and it doesn’t look anything like the idealized Huff version.

The final interpretation was an Indian raising his hand in friendship. Huff with amusement commented, “Since there was no picture of the man, it was a figment of my own imagination.” Completed in June 1934, the statue was unveiled in a great ceremony, complete with parade and about 3,000 spectators. The Wahoo Drum Corps of Concord attended and speeches were made.

Joseph Nolan spoke, followed by Dr. Vance Clymer, Sachem of the Massasoit Tribe, Improved Order of Redmen, along with State Senator McCormack of Rio Vista and Gov. James Rolph Jr.

The long program concluded with the unveiling by Mrs. H. Vance Clymer, while everyone sang “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Solano’s statue remained at its remote location until 1938. It was decided to move the symbol of the county to relative safety in front of the old library after vandals desecrated and damaged the sculpture.

The Jerome Foundry steered a lot of business to Huff. He became the sculptor of the E Clampus Vitus society, a group devoted to the Old West. He sculpted many of the plaques the group placed around the state.

“There was a lot of work then and I was lucky,” Huff admits, “The breaks have come my way all of my life.”

In 1939, Huff was commissioned to supply sculptures for the Golden Gate International Exposition that was held on Treasure Island. Huff’s most visible works at the Exposition were the four statues surrounding the plaster Tower of the Sun. The statues
represented; Science, Agriculture, Industry and Art.

In addition to these monumental works, Bill also created several sculptures and dioramas for the University of California Museum of Paleontology’s exhibit.

The large bas-relief depiction of two extinct American lions attacking a long-horned species of extinct bison was moved, after the Exposition, to Berkeley and put on display in McCone Hall on the University’s campus.

In the 1970s, Huff returned to Solano County through the urgings of Rod Rulofson, who was the curator of the Pena Adobe and Bob Allen of the Vacaville Heritage Council. The Pena Adobe had been painstakingly and lovingly restored. Huff created a donor’s plaque for the dedication ceremony.

Then he went on to create terra cotta plaques of pioneers, Juan Vaca and Juan Pena. These hang in the E Clampus Vitus Hall of Comparative Ovation at the Old Timer’s museum in Murphys. He also donated the plaster model of Solano’s head. There is also a bas-relief self-portrait of William Gordon Huff at Vacaville City Hall.

Huff’s 90th birthday was celebrated in February 1993 with newspaper stories reminding everyone of his many accomplishments and the special tie he will always have to Solano County. Huff lived his last days in Alamo, Doris having predeceased him.

Loyal readers: Does anyone have any information about the Hunter Boat Works that played a very important part during World War II? They were located in Suisun. Anyone who might have information or photos, please contact me.

Note: The Museum Roundtable group that is part of the Solano County Historical Society is making great progress in obtaining sponsors toward a county museum for Fairfield. The preferred site is the old library at Texas and Union streets, where the statue of Chief Solano stands greeting residents and visitors alike.

The building is currently vacant. Now is the time and opportunity to get a museum where those bits and pieces of history that are in private hands could be placed. Kudos to those hard-working individuals who are trying to preserve local history for future generations.