

Artist Korczak Ziolkowski came to South Dakota with a vision—to carve the world's largest sculpture and memorialize Crazy Horse, the Lakota Sioux leader who helped to defeat Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer at the Little Bighorn.

Ziolkowski was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1908 to Joseph and Anne Ziolkowski. Orphaned when an accident killed both parents, he lived in a succession of foster homes and worked at tough, manual-labor jobs that primed him for his later life as a mountain carver. At age sixteen, Ziolkowski ran away from home. He attended Rindge Technical School, graduating in 1925, and began work in the East Boston shipyards as a pattern maker and carpenter. When Boston judge Frederick Pickering Cabot noticed a yacht figurehead Ziolkowski had carved, he recognized the young sculptor's talent and became his benefactor, exposing him to the arts and society.

Ziolkowski married Dorothy Brewster Comstock, a New England aristocrat, in 1934 and began creating commissioned works at his studio in West Hartford, Connecticut. In 1939, his bust of Polish pianist Ignace Paderewski won grand prize at the New York World's Fair, establishing his prominence as an artist. Later that year, Ziolkowski traveled to South Dakota to work with Gutzon Borglum on Mount Rushmore. His stay in the West was brief, but while there, Chief Henry Standing Bear presented him with the idea of carving an American Indian memorial in the Black Hills.

After serving in Europe as an artillery sergeant during World War II, Ziolkowski sold his Connecticut studio and returned to South Dakota. On 3 May 1947, he pitched a tent near Custer and filed a mining claim at the base of Thunderhead Mountain. A year later, Standing Bear touched off the first charge of dynamite, and Ziolkowski's dream began to take shape. When the sculptor's first marriage ended in divorce, he married his assistant, Ruth Ross, in 1950, and the couple raised ten children.

The Crazy Horse Memorial grew in fits and starts over the next three decades as the Ziolkowskis struggled to raise funds, work on the mountain, and create a visitor center. By the time of Korczak Ziolkowski's death on 20 October 1982, an outline of the Lakota leader was clearly visible on the mountainside. The sculptor is entombed at the base of the mountain, and his family continues to work on the monument.

by John M. Duffy

Dakota Images



Korczak Ziolkowski

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