

RICHARD CERASANI

Book Excerpt

Love Letters from Mount Rushmore: The Story of a Marriage, a Monument, and a Moment in History

The discovery of a treasure trove of letters, diaries, and photograph negatives in his parents' attic led Richard Cerasani to write Love Letters from Mount Rushmore: The Story of a Marriage, a Monument, and a Moment in History, published earlier this year by the South Dakota State Historical Society Press. The book tells the story of his parents, Arthur Cerasani and Mary Groz Cerasani, who spent six months separated by more than fifteen hundred miles as Arthur worked on the carving of Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills of South Dakota. A sculptor and painter, Arthur Cerasani had struggled throughout the Great Depression to find fulfilling work that would support his wife and two young sons. When Gutzon Borglum offered him the opportunity to work on Mount Rushmore National Memorial, he jumped at the chance, traveling there from his family's home in Avon, New York, in March of 1940. Love Letters from Mount Rushmore combines the personal story of Arthur and Mary Cerasani, who stayed connected through daily correspondence, with the story of the monument, a project begun in 1927 but plagued by delays. The four chapters excerpted here give a flavor of life working on the mountain, with all of its dangers and uncertainties.

CHAPTER THREE

The Knock at the Door

On January 10, 1940, Dad was at his parents' home located at 191 Lewis Street in Rochester, New York, when he answered a knock at the door. On the front porch stood an older man with white hair, prominent ears, and a mustache. My Dad reported the conversation in the following way.

"Hello," the stranger began, "the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery has informed me that local artists live at this address. I need some help

Love Letters

FROM MOUNT RUSHMORE

The Story of a Marriage, a Monument, and a Moment in History

RICHARD CERASANI



on the casting of a bust. It will be of Frank Gannett, the owner of Gannett newspapers. Am I at the right place?"

Caught by surprise, my father told the man that he had indeed come to the correct address. "I am an artist, sir, to be precise, a sculptor and a painter. During the week, I live in Rochester and teach art."

"Good, and I am Gutzon Borglum."

Only six months before, my parents had traveled west to visit relatives in California. During the journey they had taken a detour and driven through the Black Hills of South Dakota, stopping to see the carvings of Mount Rushmore. In my mother's diary for that day, her entry reads: "Wouldn't it be nice to be working here as a sculptor on this historical undertaking?"

Now, a mere six months later, who was standing on the doorstep before Dad but the famous sculptor of Mount Rushmore! My father invited him in, and Mr. Borglum explained that he needed a clay model of a bust he had been commissioned to execute. My mother recorded in her diary that night: "This evening Arthur called saying he was casting a head for the sculptor Gutzon Borglum. It is of Mr. Gannett of Rochester." Additional entries convey details of my parents' relationship with Borglum:

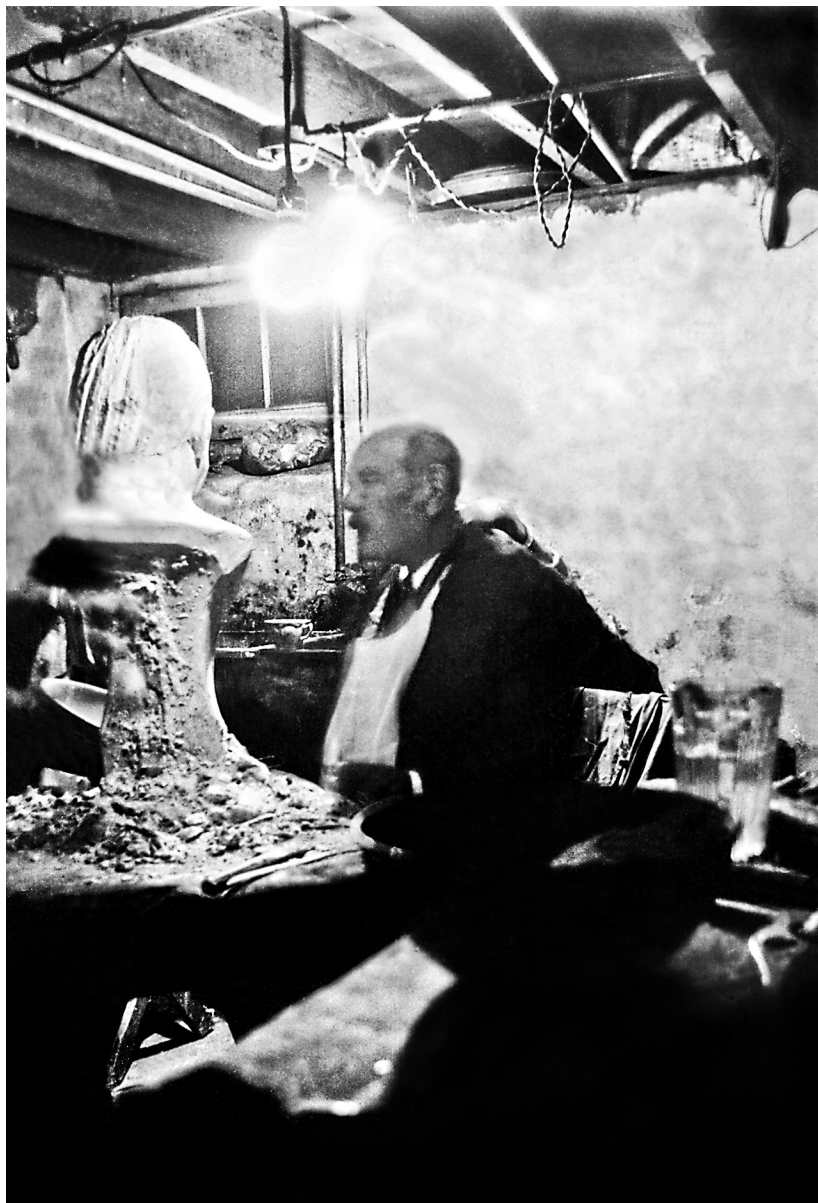
January 12

Found Arthur working on Frank Gannett's sculpture by Gutzon Borglum. I met Borglum. He is very charming. He wastes no time. As soon as he arrived, he went right to work helping Art with the head. *He has asked Art to go out to South Dakota* to work with him near the Rushmore Memorial. He said he would get more pay and advancement.

January 13

Borglum left last night for NYC telling Art to be sure to keep in touch with him; he definitely wanted him with him.

Dad never told us exactly what he was thinking at the moment he met the famous man, but to say he was surprised is most certainly an understatement. That knock at the door was the beginning of a rela-



Gutzon Borglum works on the bust of Frank Gannett in the Cerasanis' basement.



Arthur and Mary Cerasani examine the Gannett bust.

tionship that would affect our entire family life. It would also alter the course of my father's career.

Hope finally loomed on the horizon, and the atmosphere was full of joy. The fact that the offer of work had come from a famous artist generated much energy and excitement in the Grow and Cerasani clans.

Meanwhile, Dad continued doing any work that he could find while waiting for instructions from Borglum as to when to come to South Dakota. Mother's diary recorded that Dad took home \$1.50 for a day shift and \$1.25 for an evening shift, "when he could find someone to hire him."

The long, cold winter days started to add up, and the weeks of waiting turned into a couple of months. After Dad had received neither word nor a reply after three attempts to reach Borglum, "the big break" turned into "the big wait." Mother and Dad looked forward to the mail each day but were disappointed. What was the meaning of Borglum's silence, and how long would they have to wait for some news?

Eventually, the lack of news from Gutzon Borglum had my parents doubting the sincerity of the famous sculptor's offer. Was the promise of working with him based on empty words? Was Borglum just some sort of a politician or a charismatic celebrity making a promise without any intention of following through?

Little did they know, but during this time, Gutzon Borglum was also struggling. Only later would they learn of the sculptor's difficulties, which, for the most part, centered on health issues. Finally, two months and ten days later, on March 23, 1940, Holy Saturday, news from Gutzon Borglum finally arrived.

Family members have told me that Gutzon Borglum's long-awaited letter, written a few days earlier, precipitated an outbreak of exuberant joy. Mother was ecstatic that her husband, a talented artist, had finally received the recognition he deserved. As for Dad, I can only imagine that, with his exceptional tenor voice, he must have broken out in full vocal expression, as he was prone to do during happy times. He may have assumed the character of Rodolfo in Act One of *La Bohème*, singing, "*Che gelida manina!*" ("What a cold little hand!"). Dad loved to hit those high notes through which he could express power and great joy. After all, he had studied that role with his voice coach from the Eastman School of Music. As a child, I remember numerous times when Dad would show off those high notes in front of family and friends as a way of celebrating and expressing good news.

The celebration of Borglum's message continued that evening, with Dad taking Mother out dancing. Mother's diary states that Dad had

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March 20, 1940

Dear Arthur Carasani:-

Your letters have been received--all of them I believe, and the only reason that you have not received an answer is that I have been in the hospital, away from home and I'm ill.

I wish that you would make your plans about the first of April, Come two or three days before or after; it doesn't make any difference which. I have made arrangements for the work that I want you to do. It will be work that you like to do. When you come and have been at work a week or two, and can understand conditions here I will talk to you about your brother if you would like to have him come and if he wants to.

If you have a little automobile of your own you will find it very convenient out here, but if you only have one for the family I wouldn't advise bringing it; come by train. I want you to arrange to live near the work on the mountain. There are many people there and you can have plenty of company and be very comfortable.

Please write to me at once and tell me your plans.

Very sincerely yours,

Gutzon Borglum
Sculptor-Director

Mr. Arthur J. Carasani
191 Lewis Street
Rochester, N. Y.

The long-awaited letter from Borglum finally arrived in March of 1940.

been scheduled to sing in a minstrel show the coming week, but it had been quickly decided that a possible singing career would have to take a back seat to an actual job.

On the next day, which was Easter Sunday, Dad sent Gutzon Borglum a night letter saying that he would leave on Thursday for South Dakota. Then on March twenty-fifth, a letter arrived, this time from the executive offices in Keystone, South Dakota, confirming the need for Dad to arrive at Mount Rushmore. For the next couple of days, Mom and Dad scrambled to get him ready for the trip. A Western Union telegram arrived on March 28th, giving Dad further instructions.

CHAPTER FOUR

Early Days in South Dakota

Over two and a half months had passed since that knock on the door and my father's first encounter with Gutzon Borglum on the front porch of his parents' home in Rochester, New York. The prolonged silence had been broken by the letter acknowledging that Gutzon Borglum was hiring him. Now, my father was finally on his way to fulfilling his dream in what was for him the chance of a lifetime.

"Art and I drove to the New York Central Railroad Station in Rochester, this morning," Mother wrote in her diary on March 28, 1940. "There was heavy fog, making the trip difficult. We were quite calm, though our hearts were heavy because of the departure. I hope and pray that his new adventure means something good in the way of advancement for him and that I can go there soon to be with him." One can only imagine the thoughts racing through their minds as the time to say goodbye approached. They had no idea how long they would be apart, nor what would transpire in both their lives during my father's sojourn in South Dakota.

Once again they found themselves at the New York Central Railroad Station, where five years earlier their lives together had begun. Mother's bridal book entry for February 7, 1936, had read: "Arthur placed the engagement ring on my finger in the New York Central R.R. Station, Rochester, N.Y., at about midnight. I had just heard *Faust* at the Eastman Theatre." This starting place for their lifelong commitment to one another had now become an ironic symbol of their separation.

Somehow, my mother found the inner strength to put my father on the train to Rapid City that day in March, knowing that he was leaving her alone with two small children to care for and that it would be a struggle for her to find the means to obtain enough money to feed and clothe the family. Many questions must have swirled around in her mind: How will Arthur do at Mount Rushmore? How long will he be away? When will I see him again? How am I going to manage without him?

In her diary, she clearly expressed her emotions: "I feel very hollow and empty just at the thought of Art being so far away." This statement was followed by something no one in the family had known. Evidently, she had not even told my father about it before his departure. "On top of all," she wrote, "I believe I'm pregnant again and physically near a nervous wreck now." One can assume that she did not tell Dad because she did not want him to stay home with her and sacrifice his dream. It is fair to say that my mother placed his happiness and need for fulfillment above her own.

Mother returned home, and Dad began his journey with anticipation and speculation as his travel companions. He spent the next two days and two nights on various trains: Rochester to Chicago and then on to Keystone with numerous stops along the way.

While he was on the train, Mother sent him a telegram giving him further instructions about his arrival. Borglum would have a car waiting at the station to pick him up. Dad's postcards written on the ride to South Dakota give some insight into his initial hopes and expectations. "It's surely great of Borglum to have a car for me," he wrote on March 28. The countryside outside the train was "waiting like I am for life, new life, spring." On arrival in Rapid City on March 30, he scribbled, "What luck!! I think I will be living by Mt. Rushmore."

Dad's enthusiasm was still evident even after the arduous days of travel. Arriving before dawn, he wrote a postcard home with the news that there was "no one at the station waiting for me but—I suppose it is [too] early for them." Here he was at 6:15 a.m. on a dark, isolated, and presumably cold train platform with no one to greet him. To make matters worse, his travel trunk, which Mother had packed for him, was missing. Not on the train when he arrived, it most likely had been

misplaced when he was making one of his connections, and for all he knew, it could have been back in Chicago.

Time passed, until the minutes grew into hours. My father must have agonized again about his decision to work with Borglum at Mount Rushmore, the enchanted mountain where an artist like himself could pursue his love for creative expression. Here, he would have the opportunity to use his hands as a sculptor instead of doing the work he had been forced to do for the last few years in order to meet his family obligations. It had to have weighed heavily on him that his wife and their two young children were forced to fend for themselves at home, while he had set off with the hope, not a guarantee, of making a better life for all of them.

The hours continued to pass without anyone coming from Borglum's operation. Then, after ten hours, a man finally showed up to drive Dad to his new job.

Dad's first letter to Mother after his arrival revealed his impressions:

Mount Rushmore

March 30, 1940

25 to 11 P.M.

My most adorable wife,

Darling if God ever made a lonesome man—one whose very heart is breaking—he made me. Never have I missed or longed for any thing or any body as I do now. Now I realize what you meant. Nature with its beauty can not replace the hunger for human life—it really is cruel its very silences hurt the ears its bigness destroys our sense of balance. What extremes are these.

My day has been so unpleasant. It started by my trunk not reaching Rapid City. Borglum thought I was coming Sunday, so no one was at the station, its cost me plenty calling so I remained at Rapid City waiting for the 3:15 train—it came but no trunk, so I [was] waiting from 6:15 A.M. to 4:15 P.M. for someone to come. They did in an old truck—driving like mad over hills and curves. Arrived no Borglum or son. The place is a mess, conditions are miserable, dirt and [filth]. And the people, the place I ate would make one [think] of the story Jr. Grow [tells] about [Mother's brother had experienced third-world

conditions in the oil fields of Venezuela, where he worked as a geologist for Standard Oil]. Low ceiling, 4 beds, smoke, no place to take a bath—some of the fellows go to Rapid City for baths. The Gov Agent [Frank Skells] sent me to an empty office to sleep tonight. It's cold (no heat) so I am sleeping with bath robe. If only you could have [seen] what I saw and the place and the people you would not have stopped. It's no place for good people. I'll see and have a talk with Borglum as soon as I can, now I can not return, I will have to fight, what [breaks] my heart is the fact that as soon as I saw conditions and the people I knew I could never see you again—that is, not here. I could never have my wife and children come to this, this is not progress, it's not even life. It's a good thing I have a picture of you smiling it gives me strength, and God I really need it here. I am writing this to you because I love you and want you to know the truth, please don't show it to anyone. So forget any plans of coming here—if I can, I'll see what else there is to this wonderful place. Most of the married people live at Keystone, 3 miles from here—but they say rents are high—living is high and the places are rotten. Forgive me if this sounds boyish but it's the truth—Goodnight sweetheart and God bless you and the children and keep you well. Write darling and be happy. I fight, see to the very end. Love Arthur

Then, in a kind of postscript, Dad added a few extra lines:

“[T]he altitude is 5,700 where I am staying, it hurts the ears. Monday will tell what I am to do—and why. How are things at home? Just had dinner. . . . Going to Rapid City with the boys—will write tonight. Your Affectionate Hubby.”

The following day's letter was not more optimistic, although one can sense a more philosophical tone. It also responded to some startling news he had just received from Mother.

Keystone, SD
March 31, 1940

My darling wife:

How are you tonight? Write and tell me about your self and the children. Are they well? Did you see the Dr? And are you really!!? Mary,



This photograph by John Vachon shows a rustic downtown Keystone.

I am really glad I came; it makes me realize what a lucky man I am having you. You know I love you very much to do this, you really cannot conceive what it is all about I shall not burden you any more with my troubles. They are things I must take and do the best I can with. Whatever I do, this experience must serve us. When I learn more about what I am to do—salary and etc. I will be in a better position to judge—and write.

Living can be crude but this place takes the cake. The people here are perfectly happy with the crudity and filth. They eat, sleep and play pool and drink. I hope I can profit by the lesson. I pray there is something in store that will make up for the miserable conditions the danger to my health and the stagnation of my finer interest in life. But it may make me wiser. I think it would be good if you wrote a letter for me to Mrs. Moore and send it so I could rewrite it, asking to be considered for Fran's job [Mary Cerasani's sister, the artist.] You see

darling I had a talk with the Government agent here—he likes me and has informed me in confidence to have a heart to heart talk with Mr. Borglum, and also informed me the job may last only until June. So you see we must be careful with our plans. It is getting colder and my nose is bleeding so must close. Goodnight darling. Your affectionate Arthur

Love & kiss[es] to you and Arty & Dicky

Cannot sleep—so I shall write a bit more.

Oh! Did I tell you I rode in to Rapid City this afternoon to get my trunk and had to go to a movie with the people that drove me, and guess what we saw. Castles on the Hudson—a prison picture and was it passable. And did the driver drive, what fools, just as crazy as they make them, they drive all over the road, they fly.

Don't tell any one about anything I have written.

How is this for a good boy—I have refused drinks not a one.

Hope I was home close to you sweetheart.

Missing you

Arthur

No place to take a bath no toilets, out door affairs it is sad but it is the truth.

Goodnight, my dearest love.

Mama, goodnight

For all the disillusionment and disappointment he had already endured during his first week away from home, Dad's next letter would be the most startling of all. April first, better known to western civilization as April Fools' Day, was to be a crushing day for Dad's aspirations. Lincoln Borglum, substituting for his father, Gutzon, showed up to greet Dad and informed him of the work he was to do. My father recorded this meeting in a long letter to Mother later that day. Most disappointing, he told Mother, was the news that he would not be casting or sculpting; he would be surveying.

Dad must have been dumbfounded as he listened to what Lincoln Borglum told him. Leaving his family to do *what*? Had a mistake been made here? My father had never worked as a surveyor. In Rochester, he had worked alongside Borglum as a sculptor, helping with the casting

of the Frank Gannett bust, and that was what he believed he had been hired to do.

After all, Gutzon Borglum's letter of March 20 had made the Rushmore job official and seemed clear enough: "I have made arrangements for the work that I want you to do. It will be work that you like to do."

Dad struggled to understand what had just happened. As the newest arrival at Mount Rushmore and having no friends or confidants to discuss this upsetting news with, Dad poured out his disbelief and fears to Mother the only way possible: by pen and paper.

The last line of Dad's April first letter to Mother summed it up: "We should see [it's a] national holiday—April fools day."

Mother's reply to this unexpected news was penned on April 6, 1936, and reveals her penchant for getting to the point:

Why aren't you working in your own *line of work*? Talk to Borglum and let him know your efficiencies. Think clearly, dear, be diplomatic but please go to the point and be systematic about it. You must know definitely what you are there for, how long and all about it. Go to Borglum's place yourself. Be business-like. It is your right to know where and how you stand and to have some sort of a guarantee. You have a family and for that reason you must know . . . *is your job to continue to be mathematical?*

Mother encouraged my father to face the reality of the situation and to find a book that would teach him all about surveying.

Dad, meanwhile, was attempting to face his fear of heights and ascend the mountain to take measurements. He reported on April 5 that he had to go up to 6,200 feet on that granite mountain and familiarize himself with the four heads of the presidents. He wrote: "I was on all the levels, imagine me up there, but I did it. What a sight. I hope I can take you up some time."

A few days later, he reported that he had been up on the mountain all morning, drawing. "They tried to have me go out on a harness," he confided, "but I would not. Let them laugh if they want to, I should worry, you know how I like going on high spots." Dad had already written Mother about the "poor men that work up on the mountain. I cannot see how they stand it, the dust, the noise, and the dizzy altitude.

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Monday evening April 1, 1940

Dear Mary,

I received your letter this evening. It was great to hear from you. There is little I can say as far as information goes. I have met Lincoln Borglum and have had orders what to do. and if you think they are easy - you must guess again. That is Gutzon's orders. This morning I have started to make a scale reproduction of all the grounds. It covers all the park area. topographical survey. a map to scale, what a problem. After this one is made we are to do a great one immense in size, poor me.

All seems to dream, a mystery here I am all alone in the new office Bldg. cold. I hope they can fix a place here for me to stay. it is away from every body, no one to talk. I spent all day at the studio with an assistant. The person that is working with me is a pointer on the mountain. The casts are in the studio they are 1/20 of the real heads, about 201 inches high. There was little head there. the studio is a great big affair. We tried hard to put enough logs in the big fire place - but no use. A thick fog has swallowed the whole country side it is like a cold wet breath wetting everything. It started about 9:30 this morning. first swallowing Keystone and then taking the lower slope of the Mts. until the heads all disappear. leaving a heavy milk fog over everything. Our small settlement at the Mt. is called ^{Keystone} Rushmore. Keystone is about 3 miles away - and all mining town. like you see in the movies. everything is old and falling apart. people have just really started to live there since the mount



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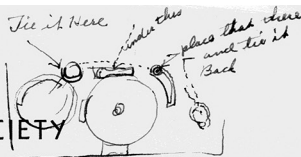
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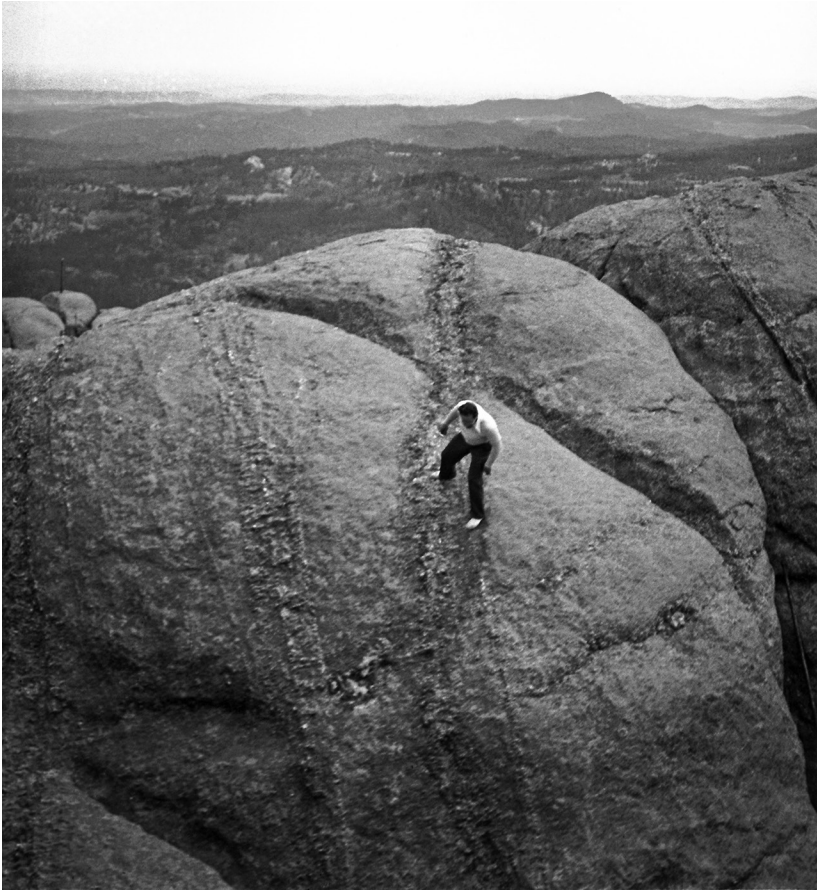
Rushmore work - it was an empty town for about 40 years. Rapid city is about 23 miles away - so you see there is little to do. We start work at 7³⁰ and quit at 4⁰⁰. giving one a long night to be lonely with. Sorry I did not bring my Fracton chair. This as I see it is going to be a big fight. but I will fight. - Forgive my writing but I do all my writing in bed. Could not sleep last night so cold. I pray Borglum comes, I don't know what I am working for.

I did write, and also told you I had received your telegram ~~was~~ the train at 10:00. What writing! well maybe its because I am sleepy. Oh! mama tomorrow I go up up to the heads on the mountain for survey work. What fate - ah! it is my destiny. Oh! mama I hope I could earn enough money so we could be together again, that is not here, this is no place for you and the children, I say this sweetheart, because I love you very much.

Mama about the rackets - you can fit it take that small shift and put it back as far as you can and tie it that should be like this it may be like this now tie it like this to hold it back. Just had Co. 2 fellow and his wife - wasted 2 1/2 hrs. the girl is going to have a baby and the fellow wants me to sleep - in art. I just found out that for food a cow's going to cost me \$7.00 a week and what about sleep oh! oh! Well how are things mama darling go right away to Be Co. you really can't now. Take care of your self darling. I love more the life - Goodnight sweet - Sleep well and strong
Love Arthur

we should see its national Sunday April 10th day. What

Arthur Cerasani's April 1940 letter details his disappointment about the work he was hired to do.



Cerasani conquered his fear of heights to complete his work as a surveyor.

The way they hang on the side of the mountain in harnesses is enough to scare a man to death. Well I suppose they too must eat.”

Perhaps Dad’s letter of April 3 provided the most detail about how hard life had become for him:

Just received your letter dated Mar 30. I will try and answer all of your questions to the best of my ability. I think some of them I have answered in one of my early letters. . . . I feel lost and forsaken. Sometime the best of us feel tired and we wonder why life has so many



Dangling from their harnesses, workers put the finishing details on the heads of Washington and Jefferson. *Image by Verne's Photo.*

sides. The two nights on the train were weary. And as for giving Borglum your respects, I [am] sorry but [I] can not at present—I have not seen him. Mama, chances of coming here are very [scarce]. It all depends on what Borglum has up his sleeves. There are twenty to forty I guess. Most of them live at Keystone, with their families. There are two families living here—the caretaker and his wife with a small daughter about two years old—and the fellow that runs the eating place and about three or four single fellows that board there. There are no accommodations. My dorm is the office, they are still working on it. It is a new building and I hope I can stay here. And I used to think that little window you used to open was much, you ought to see here, well, ice forms in your ears. The meals, well lets not talk about them. I do hope Borglum [will] make it worth while [but] I am afraid not. The wages here seem to me very small. I am going to ask about my expenses when I see Borglum. Wouldn't you?

Well let us hope he comes tomorrow.

To day has been a very cold day wind blowing and icy—no work on the mountain today. I as usual at the studio. Gee I hope I [have a] good math book. I wonder if we could get that book the Wise & Co published—fun with figures—and short cuts in mathematics. It surely would help out here. What am I to do, if the salary is small? Think of it seven dollars go every week for eats—whether I eat or not. . . .

This my dear is a weary life, I hope I may be able to sculpture with Borglum, that may help. There is no play all work and more work—up at 6:30—to work at 7:30 work until 12:00 one half hour for lunch and back to work, until 4:00 wash eat and that is all. No where to go—if you go to Keystone which is 3 miles away it will cost you money—drink and what not. So the best is to go to your room and listen to the clicking clock—I never did like clocks but now I do—it's the only thing that breaks the emptiness of this lonesome place. It's a good thing I have you to write to, it is like talking to you with my very soul.

I walked up the road, we did, to day and thought how wonderful yesterday was and how cruel to day can be. Of course the scene was different, it was as cold, can be the wind was so strong it allmost threw us off the side of the mountain. It's very cold in my room, the wind outside is blowing to beat the band. What is great about this place

is the outside John—boy if I get use to this nothing will hurt me. No way one can take a bath only with a small can of water. Well it's a good thing I have the Prayer for today. "O God give me courage to live another day. Let me not turn coward before its difficulties or prove recreant to its duties. Let me be sweet and sound at heart, in spite of ingratitude, treachery, or meanness. Preserve me, O God, from minding little stings, or giving them. Help me to keep my heart clean, and live so honestly and fearlessly that no outward failure can dishearten me, or take away the joy of conscious integrity. Open wide the eyes of my soul that I may see good in all things. Grant this day some new vision of thy truths. Inspire me with the spirit of joy and gladness and make me the cup of strength to suffering souls. In the name of [the] strong Deliverer. Amen."

As one who has spent a lifetime in theater and film, I feel qualified in saying that Dad's letters did not give Mount Rushmore good reviews. In fact, the picture he painted was bleak, and his letters were a barometer of his state of mind. The truth was simple, however—he had no other options, no other alternatives.

"I have about \$25.00 left," Dad reported to Mother. "I have to pay my board. I pay \$7.00 a week for food. As for lodging. I do not know what that is because I sleep at the office." He went on to ask Mother if she needed money and told her not to worry about getting money to him, because, as he said, "It's my job to try and get some to you." Dad informed her that they were paid every two weeks and that it would take an extra week for it to reach them at Mount Rushmore.

At this point in time, little did Dad know that he was not the only one who had money problems.

CHAPTER FIVE

Making Headway with Borglum

Gutzon Borglum himself was having a financial struggle that was far more serious than Mom and Dad's and, in fact, jeopardized their chances of getting what they needed from the sculptor. Mount Rushmore's fiscal year ended in June, and if Borglum was unable to raise

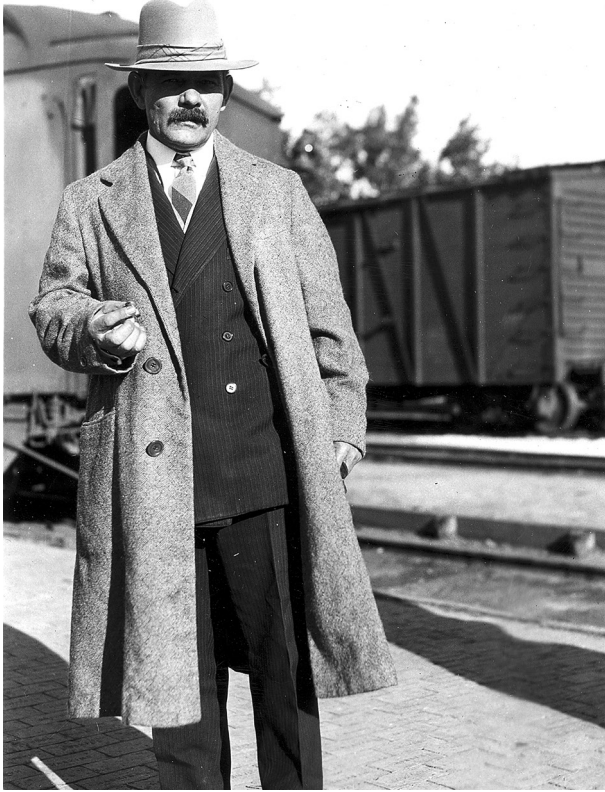
more capital from the government or from other sources, work would come to a complete halt soon thereafter.

In my experience, most artists are not outstanding businessmen. I would not expect an artist to be found at the head of the class in any financial institution. Borglum was a painter and a sculptor, a real artist and an idealist. As one studies the Mount Rushmore project from 1927 to 1941, it becomes apparent that work time on the mountain was full of downtime. Weather conditions were one cause for work being halted, but the absence of the master sculptor, who was scurrying after funds, was another major factor.

From the outset, there were flaws in Gutzon Borglum's plan for paying for the work. In his book *The Carving of Mount Rushmore* (1985), Rex Allen Smith spells out the point quite well in a chapter entitled "Government Aid—Half a Loaf, But Better Than None." Smith reported on a meeting between the sculptor and the United States president at the dedication of the site in 1927 when, Borglum said: "President [Calvin] Coolidge whispered to me, 'Who's paying for all this?'" Borglum responded, "'These farmers are paying for it.'" To which, the president replied: "'These people cannot do this and they ought not to be asked to do it. . . . You come see me when I get back to Washington . . . and we will set down and work out a plan'" (p. 172).

Borglum, however, wanted to finance the work with non-federal funds. After all, he had many well-to-do supporters, was used to raising money, and liked meeting the public. It fit his style. It also meant that control of the money remained in his hands. But was he a good businessman? Not everyone thought so. A prominent magazine owner named Herbert Myrick, who "was awed by Borglum's sculptural ability," nevertheless conceded that Borglum was prone "to 'blow in' in one way or another" any funds he got his hands on, a failing, Myrick added, that was common to all "creative geniuses" (Smith, p. 126). In spite of Borglum's preference for private funding, the South Dakota congressional delegation, with Presidential Coolidge's support, introduced a bill for \$250,000 in federal matching funds, and in 1929, the project finally took off.

Borglum was thus often away from the mountain trying to raise money either from friends or from the politicians in Washington, D.C.,



Gutzon Borglum pauses for a photograph at the Rapid City depot upon his return to the Black Hills.

causing work to stop until he secured new funding. Historians suggest that the sculptor began work in 1927 with less than ten percent of his proposed budget in hand. Finally, in 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt placed Mount Rushmore under the National Park Service, and Congress appropriated funds that required no match, but Borglum continued to be an idealist rather than a businessman, and government funding came in fits and starts as other national needs became more pressing. In the end, over eighty-five percent of the nearly one million



President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated Mount Rushmore as a “shrine to democracy” in 1936. Image by Bell Photo.

dollars spent on Mount Rushmore would come from the federal government.

In addition to Borglum's absences, weather conditions also influenced progress on the mountain. Dad reported "winds so strong that they nearly threw the men off the side of the mountain." On April 10, he wrote: "When I came out it was snowing to beat the band and it is not as cold as it has been but no one can tell, the weather changes so." He later lamented: "Here we are April 16, 1940, and about 12" of snow. All is covered with snow. The power lines are down and we are out of lights." This pattern of unsettled and extreme weather would repeat itself throughout the month of April. Dad made it clear to Mother that if the workers did not ascend the mountain, they did not get paid—a heavy burden when money was always at the forefront of everyone's concerns.

Offsetting the gloomy mood brought on by the adverse weather conditions were days when the beauty of nature and gorgeous weather inspired Dad: "You should see this sight—one cannot image these immense spruce trees laden with heavy snow, the smaller one bends to the ground, a masterpiece of beauty only God could conceive. A deep silence, the tree at attention all dressed in white guarding the mystery of the hill they stand on. The sun has appeared giving them life, but near are the big clouds to spoil the party."

Juxtaposed against these poetic thoughts, however, was the raw reality of their financial situation, coupled with the frustration over the terrible physical conditions and the prospect of doing work he had not been hired to do. At this point, Dad's letters were sounding more and more discouraged, as if he was entertaining the possibility of leaving the mountain and returning home. By mid-April, a number of his letters focused on making contact with people in Rochester who might help him get a job if the Mount Rushmore project did not work out.

He spoke of writing to two school administrators who had hired him earlier to teach art classes in Rochester and about getting information from the Borglums:

I have made up my mind. I must write to Mrs. Moore and to Mr. Bird. . . . What are we to do? God what a mess I have placed you and the children [in].

Darling do be careful. Don't work too hard. Ok! Mama I am sick and very tired of it all. I must have a long talk with Borglum, if I have to tie him up. I cannot see how you can come here on what I'll be making. Conditions are not favorable here. Darling I would rather die than subject you to all this; it would kill you and the children, no that would never do. So please consider all. There must be an answer to all this I will find it. Well with these two letters I have received today—makes the total letter received to date 15.

Well I see little Arty is writing to his daddy now. Not bad—It is wonderful—Gee he [is] some boy—Why not find a small house in Avon for you and the children. I'll send money to you as soon as I receive it, no check yet I'll have about 95 hours no its 104 hours they pay until today 13 days. What would you advise to do darling? Gee I miss you sweetheart and need you, but we must be brave and fight. Not so bad I sound like you mama. Oh! mama I cannot write my side aches so, its my left side. It's the weather I think. All day we have had rain and snow and its quite cold. The whole world seems upside down. Work—work for what end—maybe things will change but how can they. LB [Lincoln Borglum] is just a big kid—what a racket they are pulling—artist and sculptor free. I would not dare write all, but I am answering much and will tell you someday.

I will talk to GB [Gutzon Borglum] tell him all and tell him what he promised me. He must listen. Well there goes another spot of ink, don't blame me it's the pen. Well I owe about 17.00 to date, figure up how much it nets me being here. You must forgive this letter my mind will not give, its in a whirl my eyes ache and my heart. Give my love to the children and you, words fail to express my deep love and affection I have for you. Well, I did write the letter, but I see they are no good now. I'll write to Todd and send it to you, you see it and send it back. Goodnight my love.

A full two weeks into Dad's stay, the words *wait* and *waiting* appeared frequently in the love letters. He was *waiting* for Borglum to show up. And just as in the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, Dad thought that when Borglum showed up, all the problems would be resolved. Mother's queries were always based on the hope that we

children and she could join Dad in South Dakota. "Have you talked with Gutzon Borglum about the future," she asked Dad, "for we need to be together as a family."

Unfortunately, Dad's replies were not what Mother wanted to hear: "Saw GB today. I was at work, at the studio. A warm greeting and out he went—no chance to talk to him. . . . I must know where I stand." Another time he wrote: "It's the same old story. I have not had the chance to talk to GB he was in for a minute today and out he went." Or, "I have tried to talk to him but he is always with a group."

Dad's frustration continued to grow until one day he decided that he was going to make an appointment with Borglum right away, even if he had to "walk to his ranch at Hermosa, about 25 miles away." He followed this comment later with, "if I have to tie him down to get him to listen," an idea he had already expressed in an earlier April letter. Finally, Dad's response to his dilemma was to change tactics, to be cool and disguise his feelings. So, in spite of his own personal fears and concerns about the dangers posed by climbing up and over the mountain, he forged ahead.

His letter of April 10 revealed his changing attitude:

There is much to be gained if I use my head, also much to learn, something that may change the course of my life. He is a great person, and the name and association will mean a lot to me. I will have to do a lot of studying and planning if I wish to succeed. . . . you must realize the whole set up is new to me.

The work, the people, I must get used to things. The experience alone out here is worth a million dollars to me. You can never know maybe I too will carve mountains some day. . . . I must learn, yes learn all the tricks he knows and maybe more.

In attempting to adjust to not getting what he had expected from Gutzon Borglum, Dad continued: "He is old, I need to learn, and I am young—I cannot be head strong. I must be calm. . . . I have so much work to do. I don't know where to begin. Well, one must be patient and suffer."

Even though Dad's letters to Mother were likely to vent his frustra-



Gutzon Borglum focuses on his masterpieces as he ascends the mountain in the bucket and the Black Hills fold out behind him. *Image by Bell Photo.*

tions concerning his Mount Rushmore experience, a letter to someone else would take on a different tone. Dad wrote to Mother's sister and brother-in-law, painting a rosier picture:

Dear Georgia and Jack,

Well, I am in the beautiful hills of South Dakota, yes a real Hilly Billy. Thanks a million for your sweet letter. It brought love to my tired eyes. It surely was wonderful to hear from you. Remember, one becomes quite lonesome away from the ones he or she loves, not bad hey! I am working at the studio reproducing a map of all the park area—including the figures on the mt. and all the buildings—stairs and all—a real headache. It takes a lot of thought and I have to do a lot of surveying. This work moves the soul to be bound in these beautiful Black Hills. Its just ducky, you and Jack must come up sometime and visit this amazing region.

From the top of the heads you can view all of the Black Hills. One is about 6,300 feet above sea level, a sight the gods behold. The work they are doing here is indeed phenomenal, it is an immortal work of art and engineering. Ha, I am helping people make history. Here in the beautiful Black Hills, history is being born and preserved ideals of America. For this region tinged with the romance of pioneer day infused with the spirit of adventure reflects the America of heroic yesterday. These gigantic figures of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt carved with granite will for eternity of time gaze down upon the America of tomorrow and leave a record of today—I hope you may visit this amazing region someday. The heads are facing southeast—you travel from the hoist house below to the top of the mountains. On the top there is what they call a wench house. The ride up moves the soul. I was up Saturday again making my second time up the mountain—walked up and down all the heads. It surely takes the breath away. I did not ride down, I walked so that I could survey the surrounding country side. There are 600 stairs down. The proposed new steps are in drawing form. The poor fellows that drill on the mt. I cannot see how they stand it, the dust and height, it's enough to scare a man to death.

Meanwhile, Mother's letters began to express her growing maternity needs and her conviction that the new baby would be a girl. At the same time, she continued to deal with the uncertainties of Dad's situation:

April 9–April 11

We are to have a little girl. If I am to come out there to be with you, traveling after the 4th or 5th month will be difficult, especially with two active children. Very difficult under any circumstance. Now don't treat this lightly please, it is very serious. Being with you when I have the baby is the only thing I think about . . . find out about maternity Doctors in Rapid City.

April 12

Yes, we are to have a baby. He's told you you would have a future there. . . . you see you must talk to Borglum and have an understanding. Tell him I am expecting a baby so you must do some planning. You must have a guarantee of work for at least a year. A family can't move 2,000 miles without prospects, especially with the woman pregnant. . . . *He told you you would have a future there.*

Even as Mother struggled to get a complete picture of Dad's life in South Dakota, she also mixed in good advice, wisdom, and love:

April 13

Every place you go darling you will find many snakes in the grass and crude people. Just keep your eyes opened, avoid political discussions. Be a good listener, especially avoid talking factory and about those you work for. It is bad policy.

April 14

Good night darling. I miss you very much and want to be with you even with an outside toilet.

In some cases, my parents' letters crossed in the mail. Dad's April fourteenth letter revealed the bluntness of his encounter with his boss,



Despite earlier declarations to the contrary, Arthur Cereasani did “go out on the harness.”

Gutzon Borglum: “He promised and he didn’t. He claims he must see first what I can do. . . . [He says] one must earn his way . . . and as for family, there is no place for them.” Here, Borglum was referring to existing conditions at Mount Rushmore as being inhospitable.

In his April seventeenth letter, my father concurred with Borglum's assessment:

Darling, you insist on coming here. That my dear is almost impossible at present. There is no place we could get. The thing [is that] we will know in about two weeks whether we work this summer or not. It is not so easy to make \$50 a week. Maybe someday. But right now I am rated at 65 cents per hour. I talked to Lincoln today. He was much surprised at what his father had promised. He surely seems to be a good sport and is going to see if he can have it changed a bit. He does not advise the family moving here at present. I will know more about [things] tomorrow. You understand, darling, I would do anything to have you with me. We should all be together but things cannot be. We must think of our children, and this life would not be fit for you darling. I pray I will be in a position to change this in the near future.

This environment would not be a new start. It would be the end. I will see about the end. I will see about the guarantee, but that is in the hands of God.

We must not hurry. We must think and think hard. Yes, GB did tell me he needed more money, without it the whole work will fold up.

I can only imagine how that last sentence made my mother feel.

CHAPTER TEN

The Accident

While the month of April was emotionally draining, June third and fourth represented the low point of Dad's stay at Mount Rushmore. Sometimes, just when one thinks that things could not possibly get much worse, they do:

Mount Rushmore

June 3, 1940

Dear Mary,

Well, thank your lucky stars, it was not me, but this morning we had our first big accident, the bucket broke loose with five men [in it]—



Lincoln Borglum, front, and others work in harnesses on Roosevelt's head. *Image by Reynor Photo.*

and down she came. Lucky thing Matt [Reilly, foreman] put a bar of steel through the big wheel [in the hoist house] that brings the bucket up—or they would have all been killed. Two were really hurt, one very serious. It happened about 7:15 this morning. I dreamed that I came down and was hurt last night, so I refused to go up this morning—and this is what did happen. The car the five men were riding on got almost to the top and it [slipped] and down she came a mile a min. The men tried hard to stop it with a hand brake, but no use. The hand brake broke and down they came, and what blood curdling yells; it hit the flat and one man was thrown right out, and was he a mess. I was up at the studio when it happened.

Talk about Providence! Dad must have realized how fortunate he had been because of his dream the night before. Norman E. (“Hap”) Anderson was the worker who sustained the worst injury in this accident. He eventually recovered, and no one died in the fourteen years of construction on Mount Rushmore. To have no fatalities when working at heights up to six thousand feet to reshape a mountain and in the process remove one-half million tons of granite over a fourteen-year span is an incredible achievement.

As I was reading Dad’s letter of June third, a light bulb of recollection went on inside my own head. Suddenly, two incidents came to my mind that must have influenced Dad’s reluctance to take the bucket up the mountain that fateful day.

First, he had to have remembered a story from when he was a little boy. His sister Clotilda at age seven went to her father and asked him to buy a beautiful dress that she had seen earlier that day at McCurdy’s, a downtown store. She had said, “Please buy that dress for my funeral.” Her words stunned the family and left them wondering why or how such a request had come about. Nevertheless, upon her pleading, they returned to the store and bought the beautiful dress. A week later, Clotilda died. Her family went into deep shock over her death, which was due to spinal meningitis.

Then, a few years later when my father was in high school, my grandmother had begged my grandfather to keep him home because of a dream she had had. She was certain that her dream meant that



The bucket, or cable car, carried men up the mountain.



A derrick on top of the mountain and a hoist below kept the bucket going up and down.

something bad was going to happen to her son if he went to school that day. My grandfather dismissed her dream and told my father to go to school. Later that day, there was an accident in the machine shop, and my father lost his second and third fingers. Most likely the family stories of those two premonitions were enough to keep Dad from going up the mountain that June morning.

Dad's letter of June third also mentioned another of his fears related to working at Mount Rushmore. It had to do with a rumor that Gutzon Borglum was thinking about assigning him a job as "assistant pointer." Dad shared his concerns in another letter to Mother on the same day:

Darling, things are getting impossible here. No money and what not, no future, and I don't like it here. I have written to Mr. Jones and Mr. Bird and Mrs. Moore. It's no place for us—so please don't come here. Before long, I will return to you and fight hard for a new start. What I am doing does not please me and I can not earn enough for my family. I have made up my mind to study hard and work for a musical training—there is more money in that and it's better for one. I am afraid they will have me help point on the mountain, and it's dusty and I would really be ruined. One must take so many chances, and I love my family too much to do it for whom?—a man that cannot keep his promises. What would you do, Mary? After all, I am young and I will not waste my health on such a thing, would you? Of course, if you think I should do it, I will. But most of these poor men that are here will not live long—they are a sorry lot. I would rather earn less and be healthy and with my family. I would like to come home as soon as I can manage or have you a better idea—write and tell me. I am very tired and sad tonight darling—and must go to sleep, so goodnight darling, see you in dream land.

Always loving you,

Arthur J. Cerasani

A pointer is a man that checkes and marks points so that the driller can drill. Of course, it may not be, but if it is, I am leaving for home and family in one piece while I can.

To Dad, being an assistant pointer would not be a promotion and would create personal concerns for himself. In the day-to-day operations on the mountain, the pointer was responsible for handling all measurements and approving all drilling and blasting to prepare the granite for Gutzon Borglum's final design. The pointer had to constantly lay out new work based on Borglum's scale model so that there would be no delay in using the workmen to the greatest advantage.

Pointing was the term that Gutzon Borglum used to describe the method he and his workers used to transform the raw material, granite, into his subjects, the four presidents. He had developed this technique for himself at Stone Mountain in Georgia as early as 1923. As Rex Alan Smith reports in his book, Borglum discovered that he could "safely adapt blasting to the needs of the sculpture. . . . By drilling lines of holes [in the stone] and loading them with light charges [of dynamite] to be fired simultaneously, [workers] could with one blast remove great sheets of excess stone" (p. 68). Many workers had started their apprenticeship in the role of pointer or assistant pointer; even the sculptor's son, Lincoln Borglum, learned this job. It was dangerous and the method resulted in much pollution. Great amounts of water in tin cans were brought up the mountain by cable to keep the dust down to protect the workers. Many workers with a mining background had been recruited, so they were accustomed to such unhealthy conditions. They did not complain. Gutzon Borglum paid better wages than the mines did. Years later, reports of serious health issues from damaged lungs among the workers did surface.

Working as an assistant pointer would place Dad on the mountain where the blasting of the rock mass was happening. By this time, over four-hundred-fifty-thousand tons of granite had been blown off the mountain. The dusty and dirty air was not good for anyone's respiratory system. In the back of his mind, Dad still held onto his singing career as a possible alternative to being a sculptor, and the assignment possibility did not please him. It might make it impossible for him to return to the Eastman School of Music, where he had been studying voice before going to Mount Rushmore.

In his June fourth letter to Mother, Dad expressed his dissatisfaction with the man who had brought him to this place:



An invention of Gutzon Borglum's allowed workers to transfer measurements from scale models onto the mountain. *Image by Bell Photo.*

Write as soon as you can and please inform me darling what I should do. I cannot waste time, time means a lot to us. If I thought I was learning anything I would stay but G.B. does not work. He has others [do it] then places his name on it, all that is done here. I want the credit. Well, I am surely learning what fakes there are in this world. . . . Darling, at present I don't think it is wise for you to come. I am going to have a long talk with the Borglum[s] and find out all . . . this cannot go on. I have fought and worked hard, they have promised me much but give a little. . . . Here darling they use a man for what they can get out of him. I am sorry we were foolish enough to trust G.B. Now what am I to do—what can I do—although the experience I *gained* here will be useful.

Dad had come for one main reason: to learn more about sculpting from the master sculptor, Gutzon Borglum. That goal had not materialized. Dad seemed to be testing Mother about the idea of his coming home.

On June 5, Dad provided an update on the accident:

The persons that were hurt here, one is in a very serious condition, the rest seem fair. So here is hoping he gets well soon. They say Happy Anderson has one boy and a wife, and he is a prince of a fellow. But that is the way of a life, no one knows what may happen. Did anything appear in your local papers.

As Dad was expressing his feelings to Mother, events had been unfolding back home in Avon, and Mother was taking matters into her own hands. As the old cliché goes, fate has a sense of humor when dealing with us mortals.

Unbeknownst to Dad, Mother was offered the opportunity to hitch a ride going west on June third. The minister of their church, the Reverend Estes, would be driving to Rockville, Illinois. Knowing of Mom and Dad's separation, he offered her a ride to Rockville, which was as far as he was going. Getting to Rockville would place her somewhere between four and five hundred miles from South Dakota. From there, she would catch a train or bus the rest of the way.

Mother could wait no longer. Missing her husband so intensely, worried about his health, and concerned about the whole family's future, she made a decision. There was no time to debate the pros and cons or to discuss with Dad the timing of such a trip. She just "went for it," deciding to put everything on the line, including leaving her children in the care of family members and friends.

So, on June second, without any advance notice, Mother reported in her diary at 10:30 P.M. that she had made the decision. She would be going to South Dakota, and that would be that. Dad still knew nothing of this latest development. How would he react?

Mary Cerasani indeed made the trip to South Dakota, leaving the couple's children with relatives and spending the month of June 1940 with Arthur in the Black Hills. Following his wife's return home, Arthur spent his last months on the mountain working on models of the massive sculpture and its Hall of Records, a document depository that would remain unfinished. As funds ran out, the project's staff dwindled, and Arthur Cerasani returned home to New York in September of 1940. Following Gutzon Borglum's death in the spring of 1941, his son Lincoln Borglum took over, completing work on Mount Rushmore in October of that year. Arthur Cerasani went on to become an art teacher and a pioneer in the field of art therapy. After raising three boys, Mary Cerasani earned her master's degree in education, taught school, and worked as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand and Poland.

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On the covers: In this issue, Richard Cerasani gives a glimpse into the creation of Mount Rushmore National Memorial (front) through the eyes of his father, who worked on the monumental sculpture in 1940. Ric A. Dias recounts the history of Seymour Hall (back), which played a variety of roles in the life of Northern State University for sixty-eight years.

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