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THIS WEEK: Nellie Walker, Iowa sculptor

BACKGROUND:

From the book *Outstanding Iowa Women, Past and Present*
Haft and Manly, October 1980

Nellie Walker
The lady who lived on ladders

In 1893 when petite Nellie Walker and her father traveled to The Columbian Exposition in Chicago, it was to see her first work of sculpture there. They found the bust of Lincoln that she had created labeled with the title "Work of an Iowa Girl."

The attached explanation read: "This is the first attempt of Nellie Walker, of Moulton, Iowa, a seventeen-year-old girl, who at the time of doing the work, had never seen a piece of statuary of any kind; had received no instruction whatever in modeling, or use of tools. She did the cutting of the stone without assistance, and worked direct from an engraving on to the stone without model. The work was accomplished in the space of twenty-four days, between August 3, and August 27, 1892."

Nellie Verne Walker was born in Red Oak, Iowa, on December 8, 1874. Her parents were Everett and Jane Lindsay Walker, and their family consisted of five daughters and one son. When Nellie was very young, the family moved to Moulton, Iowa, where her father established a stone cutting shop.

As a child she spent many hours in her father's shop, watching him inscribe grave markers. As she grew older, she sometimes helped him carve the dates on the headstones as well as chisel some of the decorative work. Finally she had the urge to try something bigger, and at seventeen, working from an engraving of Lincoln, she executed her first work of sculpture.



Nellie Walker

After seeing her work displayed, Nellie dreamed of studying to become a sculptor. On January 1, 1900, with her diploma from Moulton High School Nellie went to Chicago to study at the Art Institute there. She immediately impressed her famous teacher Lorado Taft not only with her talent but also with her ambition. Nellie soon became Taft's assistant. She traveled throughout the Midwest on the lecture circuit, speaking to school children about sculpture and modeling in clay. Nellie also maintained her own studio in Chicago.

In 1902 while she was visiting relatives in Colorado Springs, she was suddenly called upon to make a death mask of Winfield Scott Stratton, who was sometimes called the "Midas of the Rockies." Since she was not expecting to do any work during her vacation, all her tools were in Chicago. Somehow she managed to purchase the needed supplies and went to Stratton's home. There in front of a curious crowd, she made the death mask. She took it back with her to Chicago where for two years she worked on a statue of Stratton, which is considered one of her major works.

Another famous work by Nellie Verne Walker was the huge figure of Chief Keokuk, which stands overlooking the Mississippi in Keokuk, Iowa. Chief Keokuk lies buried beneath the gigantic monument. The statue was commissioned by the Keokuk chapter of the D.A.R. and was dedicated on October 22, 1913. In 1956 Nellie Verne Walker, who by then was living in Colorado Springs, was made an honorary citizen of Keokuk in recognition for her creation of the statue.

Some of her other major works include portrait statues of James Harlan, Hall of Fame, Washington, D.C. and Haym Salomen, Chicago. Her Lincoln Monument stands near Vincennes where the Lincoln family originally entered Illinois, and her bas-reliefs include Ames Panels, Library of Iowa State University and the Suffrage Memorial Panel at the Capitol in Des Moines.

Nellie Walker made three trips to Europe so that she could study the works of the old masters there. On her last trip after studying for several months in Paris, she was forced to return earlier than planned because of the impending war in Europe.

Nellie Verne Walker never married. She once commented, "I didn't want to get married. I never met a man who could compete with the interest I had in my work."

Nellie stood about four feet ten inches tall and consequently had to do much of her work standing on a ladder. She continued to be active even in later years. At the age of 91 she completed a life-size plaster cast figure entitled "Courage."

Nellie Verne Walker, "The Lady Who Lived on Ladders," died in 1973 at Colorado Springs, Colorado.