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Audie Murphy rides again Old movies have new fans

By Mike Ritchey Star Telegram Film Writer

In 1973, Gov. Dolph Briscoe and a delegation of government and military leaders, along with an Army band from Fort Hood, marched to Greenville for Audie Murphy Day

That day, old Emmett Murphy, the lackadaisical father who had walked out on his wife and nine children when son Audie was not quite 12, heard the governor say that Audie "had possessed the same qualities of the men who fought at Goliad, the Alamo and San Jacinto in the Texas Revolution."

"Yeah," proud old Emmett may have said, aiming a stream of Red Tag Tinsley tobacco juice at some of the blackest soil in Texas, "That Audie he was a chip off the old block."

That Audie, he still rides the range adding notch after notch to the pearl handle of his six shooter on Dallas based KDFI-Television's (UHF Channel 27) "heavy western" movie programming plan.

More than that, a whole slew of new "Audieites" is springing up in the area. "I've just discovered this great old cowboy star," they say, "Audie Murphy, Have you seen *The Kid from Texas*"? Well, in 1971, the U.S. government blessed the kid from Texas, naming the new \$36 million Veterans Administration Hospital in San Antonio in memory of Audie Murphy. World War II's most decorated soldiers.

With its concentration on old western movies, Channel 27 could hardly avoid showing Murphy in, as he once put it, "the same western about 30 times, but with different horses."

"We sensed that there was a strong feeling in the area for western movies," said John McKay, owner of Channel 27. "Dallas has always been a hotbed for them, especially for Audie Murphy's stuff, which is some of the very best."

"It has been terrific," McKay added "Our ratings are up considerably, and since other station owners can read the ratings as well as I, you'll notice many of them are following suit."

McKay left Channel 4 in 1983 and bought Channel 27 last October. "Western Week" went on the air the first week he had the run of the place. Since the end of January, he has shown practically nothing but westerns. Even his occasional Mae West and W. C. Field features have had western settings.

"We'll slack off in March, but pick back up with them in May," McKay said, "That's another ratings period."

So the ratings dictate. That's nothing new. Neither are Audie Murphy westerns, nor any of the other antiquated riding', ropin' and shootin' flicks McKay has been running. What is new, is the outburst of support those films are receiving. After all, the majority of them were box-office flops when they were first released 30 or more years ago.

But if Texans - Dallas, Fort Worth Texans in particular --like shootem-ups, why wouldn't they like Audie Murphy?

Why, the boy was born and raised in and around Greenville. He had but an eighth grade education, yet he earned 24 World War II citations (some stories called it 33 or "every honor America gives in wartime"), including the Medal of Honor, and rose from private to first lieutenant on the battlefield by the time he was 18. (Later, he was promoted to captain.) He died in May 1971 at age 46, in a plane crash in Virginia, and he was buried in Arlington National Cemetery, where President Nixon paid homage: "The nation stands in his debt, and mourns at his death."

Audie Murphy was a sawed-off but real life John Wayne type whose freckled baby-face looks caused audiences to take kindly to him even when he

played the notorious outlaw who had killed 21 men by the time he was himself mowed down at a tender 21.

Twenty-one? Shoot' Audie Murphy blew away more Nazis than that before he hit 19.

AN ACCOUNT OF HIS HEROISM, read a headline on an Associated Press story:

"The lone Texan, a 19-year old second lieutenant at the time, under fire from three sides and wounded in the leg, stood atop a burning tank destroyer that, loaded with explosives, could have blown up at any minute. In that precarious position, Murphy manned the destroyer's machine gun with such deadly accuracy that he not only stopped the German attack he routed it in retreat."

But Murphy, who weighed 117 pounds and stood five-foot-five when he enlisted, always bristled when asked how it felt to have killed a reported 240 enemy soldiers.

"To begin with," he answered, "I didn't kill that many. And anyway, how the hell does anyone think it felt? It didn't feel either way, good or bad. Feeling wasn't a luxury in the infantry.

"It's funny," he recalled in later years. "I remember being worn out in the war, but I'd bounce right back. Then one night in Lyons (France), people were chanting and shouting that the war in Europe was over, I could feel the blood drain out. My blood pressure went way down and stayed there, and I've been tired ever since."

Good Americans - especially good Texan/Americans - love war heroes, even pint-sized, over-aggressive "macho men" who feel they have something to prove. It may not be too far-fetched to theorize that, of all our returning champions from theaters European, South Pacific and beyond, only Dwight Eisenhower capitalized more on his laurels than did Murphy, winner of the Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross (twice), Silver Star and Purple Heart, among 20 odd others. And Murphy was not general, no flying ace. He was a combat infantryman. Buck private, if you please.

Fought for success

Born of sharecropper parents in Greenville, the handsome boy literally fought his way to the lasting stature he ultimately achieved. His father left home before Murphy was 12. His mother died when he was 17, and the youngster helped support his eight siblings by doing odd jobs on neighboring farms. He enlisted in the Army's 3rd Infantry Division at 17, and within a year the Medal of Honor dangled from his neck. He spent 390 days on the front lines.

After the war, actor James Cagney saw Murphy's picture on the cover of *Life* magazine and talked him into trying the movies on for size. His first picture was *Beyond Glory*, and he made 43 movies in all, most of them low-budget westerns. But when *To Hell and Back* made \$10 million, Murphy shook his head and said, "I'm just as surprised as anyone. The picture just isn't that good."

Neither would the times always be so good to the cowpoke hanging on for dear life to a rambunctious shooting star.

A decade after *To Hell and Back* and just a year before the governor spoke at Audie Murphy Day in Greenville, the revered hero-cum-movie star spent four hours in jail, charged with assault with intent to commit murder after beating a Burbank dog trainer who called him "a pipsqueak and a phony movie hero." Also charged with slapping the trainer's wife around and firing several shots from a pistol in the process, Murphy was nonetheless acquitted.

That questionable affair occurred just two years after the little, boyishfaced man's admission that bad business deals had left him broke. In an unwitting preamble to his financial downfall (he filed for bankruptcy, before recouping somewhat before his death), Murphy told the *Star-Telegrams's* Jack Douglas in 1951 that he wasn't rich "A fellow out there never makes as much money as the public thinks," he said.

Nor-again unlike the public might think-does a man stop attacking when that fiery approach has been first nature and largely responsible for feast over famine. No, Murphy seemed to have a habit of whapping anyone who failed to heel when he figured it was time.

In 1962, he was accused of assaulting an 18-year old youth and threatening him and a companion with a gun. Murphy's explanation was that a young lady friend had been bothered by lewd telephone calls and he had taken it upon himself to question the boy – who he said he had no business to believe was connected with the trouble.

As much as anything else, his forced appearances in courts of law, his much-publicized divorce from a young actress who "told all" in a courtroom full of reporters and his constant interplay with the press showed him to be an honest, modest man, smart and unafraid.

When he began filming *To Hell and Back* the autobiographical film of his life story (which he also wrote), he said, "I told them to get Mickey Rooney or someone. I wasn't the type."

He was "the type." He was America through and through; fighting, always fighting - up from destitution, up through the Dust Bowl that so indelibly molded more than a generation of minds and souls in this country, up from the top of a virtual bomb to turn back the vicious Nazi horde - fighting back even from bankruptcy, that uniquely American faux pas. And like Mohammed Ali, every one of Audie's fights was fought right out in public. The pressure was always on, but the little man stood his ground, looking his oppressors square in the eye, facing the music, taking his medicine. Ali's story does, however, seem a perfect antithesis to Murphy's. Unlike Murphy, who was "made" by the war, Ali refused induction during the Vietnam War and was denied opportunity to fight for five years in his prime.

And Murphy kept returning to what he called "the only home I ever loved," once even mentioning a plan to open a sporting-goods store in Fort Worth - "were all my friends are."

Other than trips promoting his two best films, the money-making *To Hell and Back* and the disastrous *The Red Badge of Courage*, tours to tout films like *Destry*, *The Kid from Texas*, *World in My Corner*, *Bad Boy*, *The Police Story* and others brought Murphy home to Texas again and again. In 1951, his portrait was tacked up in the State Capitol. Newspaper editorials likened Murphy to Sgt. York, the famous poor boy soldier who emerged a hero

from the First World War. (Gary Cooper, a non-war hero, played that role in Hollywood.)

Save for Audie Murphy, in fact, our idea about the fighting man has been conceived and nurtured by ersatz heroes like Cooper, movie stars in makeup, heaving Old Glory aloft on Iwo Jima. Of the three actors who have made the most war movies - John Wayne, Van Johnson, and Frank Sinatra - not one ever went to war.

But unlike the easygoing hillbilly Sgt. York, however, a farmer who chose to go back home to the hills where, in 1964, he finally died in bed at age 76, Murphy "found nothing in peacetime to match what had gone on before," as an editorial writer surmised at the time of Murphy's death, adding: "It is the tragic fate of many men -no matter how old they may grow in years -to live their lives in one youthful flash. Thousands of World War II veterans, if they are honest with themselves, realize that their years in uniform were the most exciting, the most meaningful, the most memorable years of their lives. That happened to Audie Murphy, too, but on an epic scale. We sympathize."

Sympathize? Yes, surely further proof that, so far as boys and men are concerned, men *at war* is the only game that ever really counts.

William Broyles, editor of *Newsweek* magazine, published a story in a recent issue of *Esquire* called *Why Men Love War*. Not long ago, the historian and critic Paul Fussel wrote in *The New Republic* of his days as a soldier in the Pacific when President Harry Truman wiped out Hiroshima and Nagasaki, recalling the hope and prayer of every man waiting on board ship to attack Japan: "Please Lord, please, let 'em drop The Bomb." In the current *Vanity Fair* Norman Mailer's friends and relatives recount the young would be author's desire that he be allowed to enter combat in World War II, the better to enable him to write *The Naked and the Dead*.

And yes, small-town hooligans tired of raiding neighboring burgs for fistfights on Saturday night continue to see glory in trenches dug in foreign soil.

And, yes, though it is sure to be camouflaged as "defense," the majority of every nation's budget really is earmarked for war.

"War is like a giant pack rat." Murphy said at the height of his movie career in 1955, "It takes something from you, and leaves something behind in its stead." (This, at a time during which he also said he "averaged making \$2,000 a week and would be financially independent in a short time.")

"What I lost was the ability to get excited at the little things others find so much pleasure in," he said.

Opposed to Vietnam War

And in 1971, the honest man' honed from the driest of roots, came out *against* the war in Vietnam.

"I think it is morally wrong to force someone to fight a political war that we don't want to win. War is something you get into just to save your life."

And Murphy told the Associated Press that he "wasn't that different a soldier from Lt. William L. Calley, Jr.," after Calley was sentenced to life imprisonment for killing 22 civilians at My Lai.

Had he lived, Audie Murphy might really have made something of himself. Still, he did a bit better than all right.

And growing up in poverty, little Audie had nonetheless not overlooked the picture show.

I used to pick cotton all week to have 10 cents to see Bob Steele in a western on Saturday." He said.

That Audie, he liked his western movies, and the people who liked Audie liked them, too. Westerns. Shoot 'em *ups*. *Heroes*.

We don't have enough of them anymore. Audie's gone. The Duke was just a pretender, but now he's gone too.

They may be gone, but they have not been forgotten. It is not unlike the old days - the late 1940s and early '50s when Audie came to Euless each year to join in the Audie Murphy Rodeo at the old Ray Woods Ranch arena. There, the man credited with killing, wounding and capturing 240 German soldiers would take on his old friend Ray Woods in a cutting horse contest, smiling and waving to the cheering crowd.

Every day now, morning, noon and night, we can still see him, if we don't forget to look. There, among the John Waynes, the Randolph Scotts, the Rory Calhouns and the Roy Rogerses, he rides.