

A HERO'S HOMETOWN

Audie Murphy is remembered by friends of his boyhood in Celeste

By Bryan Woolley

CELESTE - The young woman at the cash register in Woody's store regards the visitor with blank wonderment. "I never heard of him," she says.

"Audie Murphy. The most decorated soldier of World War II. He was from here."

"Oh. Well, I wasn't born then."

She hasn't read the historical marker that stands forlornly beside U.S. 69 on the southern edge of town. "Most decorated soldier in World War II. Born 4.5 miles south, June 20, 1924, sixth of nine children of tenant farmers Emmett and Josie Killian Murphy. Living on various farms, Audie Murphy went to school through the eighth grade in Celeste - considered the family's home town.

The marker's flat prose goes on to sketch Audie's childhood of bleak poverty, his war record of extraordinary courage and bravery, his career as a movie actor. He was one of the most popular Western stars of the 1950s, but his most famous role was as himself in *To Hell and Back*, his memoir of his war experiences.

The marker's last lines tell of his death in the crash of a private plane in 1971. He was 46 years old, survived by a widow and two sons.

To those born after VE Day, it's just history, as remote from their own lives as the War of the Roses. But a few in the town and the surrounding countryside still remember the baby-faced buck private who marched away to fight the Nazis and the somehow different first

lieutenant who returned three years later as the most honored soldier in American history.

Audie was credited with killing or capturing more than 240 German soldiers. He had received a battlefield commission and 33 military citations and awards, including the Medal of Honor and every other medal for valor that the United States can bestow, plus three awarded by France and one by Belgium. He was wounded three times. When he was discharged, his face was on the cover of *Life*. And when he came home, he wasn't yet 21 years old.

Always burdened.

Audie's life was never easy, his old friends say. Even after the war, even while basking in the nation's adoration and winning wealth and fame in Hollywood, he always seemed under an invisible burden that he couldn't lay down.

"He came back here after the war in a brand new Buick convertible and decided we needed to go rabbit hunting in that car that very night," says Monroe Hackney, Audie's closest boyhood buddy. "We went flying over them back roads. We had a ball. But Audie never was really happy after the war. He never could get settled down. The war had a whole lot of effect on him."

"He was a very private person," says Mr. Hackney's wife, Martha. "He was shy. He didn't like the praise he got when he come home. He said the real heroes of the war was those that was killed. He sat down and visited with me for two hours one morning after Monroe had gone to

work. He told me things. He wasn't happy with Hollywood. He said, 'Martha, I think I should buy a section of land in West Texas, and you and Monroe can live on it. It would be a place for me to hide out. I am so tired of crowds.'"

He never bought the land in West Texas. He never lived again in Celeste after the war, nor in the community of Kingston, where another historical marker stands near the site of his birth, nor in Farmersville, which erected a stone monument to him in its square, not in Greenville, whose public library has an Audie Murphy Room full of photographs and paintings of him, nor in Addison, where he owned a ranch for six months, then sold it. (Its house is not Dovie's restaurant)

"Every town in this area from Bonham to Greenville claims to be where Audie Murphy lived," says Danny Lipsey, proprietor of Lipsey's Grocery in Kingston.

But Audie remained in Hollywood, a place whose culture he hated, according to his biographers. There he married a starlet and divorced her and married again. He gambled heavily and suffered recurring nightmares about the war, and would wake up screaming, gun in hand, and shoot at mirrors, lamps and light switches.

He visited friends.

But he returned often to visit with those who had befriended him in the days when he and his mother and eight brothers and sisters were living on the brink of starvation in a country town where nobody else had much, either.

Neil Williams, who still lives in a white frame house about a mile from where Audie was born, worked beside him in the cotton fields when they were 15 or 16 years old. "Those rows were only 36 inches apart," he says. "When you're hoeing cotton up and down them all day, you get to know each other pretty well. Audie and I even

had to share the same bed in the upper story of that old farmer's house."

The historical marker is incorrect, Mr. Williams says. "Audie never got to the eighth grade. He had four years of schooling at Celeste and one over there at Floyd. Then his daddy run off, and Audie had to quit school to take care of his family."

Emmett Murphy - a "drinking man," they say in Celeste - simply went away one day and left his wife and children to fend for themselves. Audie, who was about 11 at the time, became the family's chief breadwinner.

"He really come up the hard way," Mr. Williams says. "I mean, just really hard. The Depression was on during the time we was growing up, and not anybody had any money hardly. But the Murphys was as broke as the Ten Commandants. They actually didn't have enough to eat sometimes. A fellow I knew had a turnip patch. One winter, when the ground was froze, he looked out the window and saw Audie out there with a short-handled grubbing hoe, trying to dig some of them turnips out. His family was living in a boxcar at the time."

The blackland prairie of Hunt County was cotton country in those days. Little 100-acre family farms surrounded Celeste, and the farmers raised enough cotton to keep four gins busy. U.S. 69, the town's main street, was lined with grocery and drugstores, restaurants, gas stations, a couple of honky-tonks and four doctors' offices. When the 1940 census was taken, 730 people lived there.

A thriving town

"It was a good little town," says Bill Caldwell, who grew up in Celeste but lives 12 miles down the road in Greenville now. "We had a hardware store, a washateria, a café. There was a place that sold coal and grain. There was a couple of

hotels.” They all huddled at the foot of a tall water tower in the town’s center.

“Celeste was poor, but everybody seemed to be happy,” Mr. Caldwell says.

Neighbors gave milk, eggs, butter and chickens to the Murphys sometimes, and Audie worked for whoever would hire him to do whatever needed done. In his spare time, he wandered the prairie with his single-shot .22 rifle, hunting squirrels and rabbits for the family table.

“Audie could hear a squirrel walking two miles away,” says Mr. Hackney, who often accompanied him. “He was an excellent shot. You know them Big Little Books kids used to have? Me and him would hold them up and shoot them out of each other’s hands with our rifles. That was real stupid, but neither one of us ever got shot.”

Audie loved guns, his friends say, and would play dangerous pranks with them, firing over people’s heads or near their feet to frighten them. “He always had some kind of firearm close by,” Mr. Williams says, “and he didn’t seem to fear them much. My daddy taught me when I was a small boy to respect those firearms as dangerous. Audie didn’t seem to think they were. He was a good shot, though. He never hurt nobody.”

Mr. Caldwell remembers buying a revolver from Audie when he was only 12 years old. “My grandmother had died, and they split up the inheritance,” he recalls. “I got \$10 as my part. Audie had this old pistol that he had gotten somewhere, and I paid him my inheritance for it. Then I got afraid my dad was going to find out about it. I tried to find somebody to buy it off of me, and finally a guy said he wanted it. I sold it to him on credit and never got my money for it.”

A daredevil

Although small of stature - 5-foot-7 and 130 pounds when he entered the Army - Audie is remembered in Celeste as a hot-tempered scrapper and a daredevil.

“He had more nerve than anybody I ever knew,” Mr. Williams says. “One time him and Monroe, his best friend, and Robert Cawthon climbed the water tower, to that platform that goes around the bottom of the tank, and Robert and Monroe was sitting there with their legs dangling over the side, and they noticed Audie wasn’t with them. They went all around that tank looking for him, but he wasn’t there. Then they saw this little bitty ladder that led to a big ball on top of the tank. And Audie had climbed that little bitty ladder and was sitting on that ball, right on the tip top of the tower.”

When the weather was good, trips up the water tower were almost nightly occurrences. Mr. Hackney says. “Sometimes we would just sit up there and look around,” he says, “Sometimes we would throw rocks at the honky-tonk that was down below.” The rocks made an awful racket on the sheet-metal roof, and the honky-tonk’s patrons would flee into the night. “It was just something to do,” Mr. Hackney says.

But there was a bitter underside to his Huckleberry Finn childhood in this poor-but-happy town. Because of Emmett Murphy’s bad repute, many parents in Celeste forbade their sons and daughters to associate with Audie and his brothers and sisters.

“When we was starting to school, some of the kids wanted to pull him down because of his dad,” Mr. Hackney says. “But they wasn’t pulling Audie Murphy down. He had more pride than anybody I ever met. He kept his head up regardless. He was a real nice guy. He had no bad habits of nothing. He didn’t use tobacco. He kept himself neat and clean. He was as honest as the day is long. And he wasn’t afraid of nothing. He was a little fighting Irishman, a real

boogeroo. And you was either his friend or you wasn't. And if you wasn't, look out."

Mother dies

When Audie was 16, his mother, whom he adored, died, and the burden on his narrow shoulders grew even heavier. Had it not been for the kindness of his neighbors, he and his brothers and sisters might not have survived.

"Audie Murphy never did forget people that was nice to him," says Mr. Williams, "and he never did forget the ones that wasn't nice to him. He would give you a fight, in the church house or anywheres, if you wanted one."

The 100-acre cotton farms where Audie worked to feed his family are gone now, swallowed up by much larger operations that grow milo, wheat and corn, and where cattle graze. Most of the people who lived on the land moved away long ago in search of jobs. "We've got only one cotton gin now, and it's barely getting by," says Mr. Hackney. Most of the old business buildings are empty, and pansies are growing out of the cracks in the sidewalks.

But, oddly, the population of Celeste is 733, according to the sign beside the highway, almost the same as when Audie put his younger brothers and sisters in an orphanage and marched off to war. "A lot of people come back here to retire," Mr. Hackney says.

And as long as here are old folks in Celeste, he says, Audie Murphy won't be forgotten.

"Me and my cousin George was talking about him just the other day," Mr. Hackney says. "His name comes up in a lot of conversations around here. We want to keep it coming up. A country without heroes is hurting. We need to keep him alive."