

Greenville Herald Banner

August 1, 2001

AUDIE STATUE FINDS A HOME

By Milton Babb
Herald Banner Staff

The battle over the placement of Greenville's Audie Murphy statue may finally be over. The board of directors of the American Cotton Museum passed a resolution Tuesday to accept the 10-foot-tall bronze likeness of America's most decorated soldier of World War II to be placed at the American Cotton Museum grounds.

The Greenville city council passed a similar measure last week. Jack Finney, the man chairing the three-man Sesquicentennial committee that raised the funds, said then that he was unsure if they were willing to turn the statue over. The committee had recommended putting the statue at the Fletcher Warren Civic Center. John C. Reynolds, museum board president, initially passed out a written resolution for consideration by the board.

"The purpose of the called meeting is to consider a name change of the American Cotton Museum by including the name of Audie Murphy in the museum's name and vote on the new name as agreed upon by the board," the resolution read. Reynolds then asked member Paul Matthews to address the group. "I have talked with Jack Finney and I believe we have the opportunity to put the controversy and contention in Greenville behind us," Matthews said. Matthews indicated that the statue committee had agreed verbally

to put the artwork on the museum grounds. He then presented illustrations of a proposed billboard given to him by the Sesquicentennial committee.

Two versions of the billboard were passed around the room, both of which included the name of Audie Murphy in the museum name. "I'm begging you to accept this offer and put the billboard on the highway," Matthews said. There was considerable discussion about whether Murphy's name was to be a part of the billboard advertising only or to be incorporated in to the museum name itself. Matthews assured the group that the museum's name could remain unchanged.

A motion was then offered to simply accept the Audie Murphy statue to be placed on the museum grounds. It was quickly seconded and passed unanimously. No action was taken on the printed resolution agreeing to a name change or on the billboard. Matthews said he was proud that the "dissension and the black-eye on our community" had been erased.

Finney was contacted by The Herald Banner shortly after the meeting. He, too said that he hoped the controversy could be set aside. "We're trying to work this out," Finney said. Finney, Leo Hackney and James Taggart took on the task of having the statue cast as an outgrowth of Greenville's Sesquicentennial celebration last year.

Finney also said that the money for the statue had been raised by the Sesquicentennial Committee acting under the 501(c)3 charter of the Greenville Chamber of Commerce. "They have received all the funds, and they are holding it in escrow. We've paid out very little so far," Finney said.

The statue may still legally be owned by the sculptor Gordon Thomas. Finney said the artist had not as yet been paid anything for his work. "We've offered to pay him along, but so far he has declined, saying he knows the money will be there when the time comes," Finney said.

Finney elaborated on the conditions he has asked for regarding the \$100,000 statue. Asked if he had offered the statue to the City of Greenville on the condition that it be placed at the

civic center, Finney replied "Yes, that's what we did." Finney was less adamant about the name change at the museum and said his idea was that the proposed billboard would be paid for by the city.

Museum director Adrien Witkofsky said she hoped the saga was at an end. "We'd like to have it here. That's no secret," Witkofsky said. "We have watched it come to life."

Murphy was born to sharecropper parents near the Hunt county community of Kingston. He later attended school in Celeste and Floyd, and lived for a time in Farmersville.

Murphy worked in Greenville at a local radio shop, and on his 18th birthday enlisted in the army at the old Greenville Post Office at 2920 Lee Street. Witkofsky said the statue would be a natural tie-in to the museum's Audie Murphy exhibit.