

UNVEILING OF STATUE, TRIBUTE CAP MURPHY ACTIVITIES

By Brad Kellar / Herald Banner staff
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The afternoon sun gleamed off of the bronze statue of Audie Murphy which was unveiled before a crowd of hundreds outside of the Audie Murphy/American Cotton Museum Saturday.

The shine matched the glowing tributes about Murphy during the event, the cap to this year's Audie Murphy Days festivities. The likeness crafted by sculptor Gordon Thomas had been kept under wraps for weeks and was greeted with cheers and applause when it was finally revealed Saturday.

Thomas explained how the statue was only the first phase of a much larger project, including a memorial wall, to recognize all Hunt County veterans.

"It is to honor and bring remembrance of all those who have given their all to their country so that peace might prevail," Thomas said. "It is truly a highlight in my career to do this."

Murphy was born in Hunt County,

joined the United States Army in Greenville and went on to become the most decorated American soldier of World War II. "He was awarded every medal this country has to offer," Thomas said. "It was true today and it will be true tomorrow." Murphy also starred in more than 40 motion pictures before he was killed in a plane crash in 1971.

The 10-foot statue sits atop a five-foot granite marble base, based on a photo from the movie about Murphy's life, "To Hell and Back", is visible from Interstate 30 and includes information about Murphy's military career, as well as the names of the individuals and companies which contributed toward its creation.

Local businessmen Jack Finney, Leo Hackney and James Taggart formed the Greenville Sesquicentennial Committee which raised the money for the project. Finney said the sculpture was meant as an everlasting testament to Murphy and to veterans everywhere.

"This statue ... is built and given to the people of Greenville and Hunt County, so that we can always remember those who came and gave their lives so that we might be here today, and for future people to be able to look at this statue and thank God for people like Audie Murphy," Finney said.

The dedication ceremony began with the posting of colors by soldiers from the Sgt. Audie Murphy Clubs at Fort Hood and Fort Sill. Three flags will fly above the statue, representing the United States, the State of Texas and POWs/MIAs. The statue and flags will also be lighted at night.

Leslie McCullough with the office of Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchinson read a letter in which the Senator said "Murphy's achievements rank above the greatest in our nation's history."

Mayor Byron Chitwood presented an official proclamation in Murphy's honor, while State Sen. David Cain presented a Texas flag which had flown over the state capitol in Austin.

Thomas recalled how he actually began working on the statue

inside the museum.

John Reynolds, president of the museum board, said everyone associated with the facility was proud that the day had finally come for the unveiling. "Many of us had watched it since the conception of the statue and watched Gordon day by day," Reynolds said. "It has been a wonderful work of art."

Retired Rear Admiral Bob Smith represented the National Sojourner's Alumni Chapter of Dallas and noted how Murphy was a Mason, posthumously achieving the organization's highest rank, 33rd Degree, in 1989. "He is a true, genuine, American hero," Smith said of Murphy. "All of those people who have served in combat are heroes and Audie Murphy was the greatest of them."

U.S. Rep. Ralph Hall brought along the thanks of President George W. Bush, whom Finney had invited to attend. Finney also provided Hall a miniature copy of the statue to present to Bush. Hall knew Murphy and said he would not want the statue dedicated to him alone, but to all service men and women.

"And to them and to the Glory of

God we dedicate this statue so that youngsters a hundred years from now can walk this way and wonder who he was," Hall said. "They have but to read the legend and be proud."

The statue was at last unveiled with the help of Murphy's sisters, Billie and Nadene, and many of the others whose names are inscribed on the pedestal. Not only did the sculpture receive a standing ovation from the more

than 300 gathered on the museum grounds, but many of the passing cars and trucks on the interstate sounded their own approval.

Although most of the crowd filled the museum for a reception following the dedication, dozens remained behind to get an up close look at the statue, to read the words and to have their pictures taken with Murphy in the background above them.