

GREENVILLE HEARLD BANNER

June 21, 2003

“Murphy 'family' gathers to swap stories; share laughter, tears”

By Brad Keller

Audie Murphy Days 2003 began with a gathering of faces familiar and new Friday, as more than 200 of Murphy's fans met at the Fletcher Warren Civic Center to pay tribute to their hero.

They drank coffee, they swapped stories, they laughed and they shed a few tears. Hunt County Judge Joe Bobbitt, Friday's master of ceremonies, took notice of how the annual celebration has begun to feel more like a reunion of friends and relatives.

"The Audie Murphy Family is together again," Bobbitt said.

Another full schedule of activities is on tap today, centered on the Audie Murphy/American Cotton Museum, all designed to honor the Hunt County native and the most decorated American soldier of World War II. He also appeared in some 40 motion pictures.

Audie Murphy Days is hosted by the museum and Hunt County veterans organizations. A highlight of this year's celebration will be the presentation today of Murphy's Medal of Valor to the museum by The National Order of Battlefield Commissions.

Friday, State Sen. Bob Deuell presented the museum with a plaque from the Texas Senate, which noted Murphy was "deserving of

special exultation and commendation."

State Rep. Dan Flynn said how honored he was to be sitting at his desk in the Texas House, in the shadow of the state's official portrait of Murphy.

Mayor Jim Morris read from the city proclamation designating Friday and today as Audie Murphy Days in Greenville.

Leslie McCullough with the office of U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchinson also offered the senator's praise of Murphy.

John Reynolds illustrated plans to complete the Hunt County War Memorial, which will honor all veterans from Hunt County who paid the ultimate price during the wars of the 20th Century, as well as all living Hunt County veterans.

Sgt. Jeffrey Riddle, a local recruiter with the U.S. Army, explained how challenging it was to become a member of the elite Audie Murphy Club at Fort Hood.

"You've got to have the leadership," Riddle said. "You've got to strive for something better, like Audie Murphy did."

In the audience were several of Murphy's family members and actor Paul Picerni, who

Document provided by Betty Tate

starred in Murphy's autobiographical film "To Hell and Back". Picerni was making his third straight appearance at the event.

The visitors had come from all over Texas and from as far away as California, Pennsylvania, Virginia, New Jersey, New York and Illinois and responded to the various remarks with thunderous applause, but never more so than when Jack Hawthorne delivered his winning entry in the 9th grade Audie Murphy essay contest, "I am a patriot; past, present and future."

Ben Cooper, an actor who starred with Murphy in two western movies, "Gunfight at Comanche Creek" and "Arizona Raiders", recalled how Murphy didn't know how to ride a horse when he first came to Hollywood. The hip he injured during the war made staying on the mount difficult and Murphy kept falling off during his lessons.

But Cooper noted how Murphy earned the respect of everyone on the set as he continued to get back on and try again until he was able to ride.

"That determination was astounding," Cooper said. "Just knowing him was one of the great joys of my life."

Another touching moment came toward the end of the opening ceremonies, when Clyde Easter, president of the Anzio Beach Head Organization, presented Feller Goff of Houston, Murphy's friend and a champion of the campaign to rename U.S. Highway 69 through Hunt County after Murphy, with a special Audie Murphy Memorial Award.

Easter also noted how Friday would have been Murphy's 79th birthday. He died in a plane crash in 1971.

"I believe a notice of Audie Murphy's birthday should appear on the front page of every newspaper in America and should be recognized as a national holiday," Easter said.

Friday's ceremony also featured Morgan McNatt singing the Star Spangled Banner and God Bless the USA and the Boys and Girls Club of North Texas North Greenville Branch presenting Oh Beautiful, God Bless America and two renditions of the Pledge of Allegiance, including one in sign language.

Gordon Thomas, who crafted the larger than life statue of Murphy which was unveiled last year, demonstrated the versatility of his talents by singing a trilogy of patriotic music.