Stamping out the Red Tape
By Richard Rodgers

(My personal account on how Audie got his stamp).

Comments? Comments are welcome. Just use the link below to our message board.

In the early 1970's I became an avid stamp collector, a passion which I have since not been able to completely break free of – or want to. While I no longer spend money on stamps, you can see my passion for them at the bottom of every page of the Audie L. Murphy Memorial Website. I will make it easy on you – you can see it here too.

I was drawn to the artwork (pun intended) of old-fashioned stamps because of the engraving process. The yester-year intaglio engraved images found on old-timey single or dual-colored stamps were inspiring and gorgeous. The wavy lines of raised ink on high quality paper and the stories they represented never failed to amaze me. They were things of beauty designed to provoke interest.

One evening, as a 10th grader in 1972, I watched Audie Murphy's movie TO HELL AND BACK for the first time on television. I was stunned. I lived on a naval air base in Millington, Tennessee with my father who was an active duty hospital corpsman and a non-commissioned officer. He was himself a decorated war hero from World War II, the Korean, and the Vietnam wars. Dad spotted me watching the movie and said matter-of-factly that Audie came from the same part of northeast Texas as our own family did and that we were practically neighbors too. Audie was born about thirty miles southwest of my hometown. Boy did that get my attention. Afterall, there

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1 My father, Joe N. Rodgers earned the Distinguished Navy Flying Cross, personally awarded by the Secretary of the Navy, Dan A. Kimball, as a Hospital Corpsman attached to the 1st Marine Corps Air Wing during the Battle of the Chosun Resevoir, 4 to 6 December 1950.

For more information visit the Audie L. Murphy Memorial Website at www.audiemurphy.com
are parts of Texas where you might have to travel farther just to get a loaf of bread. I was instantly hooked and could not get enough of my new hero. We shared a connection.

Not long afterwards, after doing a little research in the Millington Central High School library, I mailed a handwritten letter to the U.S. Postmaster General, Elmer T. Klassen, and asked him to issue a stamp honoring Audie Murphy. I carefully laid out my reasons why the stamp was deserved and was certain Mr. Klassen would slap his head and say “DUH” for missing something that had to be obvious to everyone else (pardon the use of a modern teenager’s vernacular). I was certain Mr. Klassen would quickly agree that Audie would make a great subject for an upcoming stamp.

I could not have been more wrong.

Not long afterwards I received an uninspiring form letter from the US Postal Service (USPS) which politely stated that the USPS’s Citizen’s Stamp Advisory Committee – not the Postmaster General – decided which stamps would be approved and released. The letter explained the rigorous selection process used to choose future stamps – all of which was based on fair-minded and unbiased scrutiny. Proposed stamps were chosen according to specific criteria which included historical significance, educational value, and other esoteric qualities deemed important to our country. Submissions were welcome – but please follow the guidelines. Later, after becoming an adult, I learned that the selection process was not an entirely honest one and was tainted by the hope of profit – a factor never mentioned by the USPS in their correspondence. But in 1972, at the tender age of 15, I accepted what they had to say on face value and in doing so believed the message.

While I do not remember everything in that letter, I do recall that it described a bureaucratic process that in my mind amounted to an unsurpassable quagmire of red tape. It was clearly designed to discourage naïve Texas teenagers living on a military base in Tennessee. Disappointed, I concluded the USPS was uninterested.

In 1980, I began an active-duty enlisted career in the Army which later progressed to a commission as a young officer. Unfortunately, in 1993 my active duty ended unexpectedly when President Clinton reduced the military forces. It had nothing to do with performance. It had everything to do with beating swords into plowshares and balancing the federal budget. During this drawdown more than 100,000 active military service members lost their jobs. It was brutal

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2 Since my 1972 letter and after the Audie Murphy Stamp Petition drive (1995 – 1999) the rules governing the proposal of stamp topics have been adjusted by the USPS giving the agency more leeway in the selection process. Current procedures and selection criteria are available at https://about.usps.com/who/csac/

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turn of events for many young soldiers hoping to make a career – and I was one of them.

Sixty days later – and suffering from a huge reduction in pay and benefits – I was teaching at Copperas Cove High School, Texas – just outside of Fort Hood. Another officer I had served with at Fort Hood had also been given his presidential pink slip and was teaching with me in the same school. It was a depressing time for both of us and misery loved company. We needed something to get our mind off our troubles. My friend found a small cheap piece of land with an old farmhouse and started to repair it on weekends. And me? Audie came to my rescue.

In 1996, I happened to read an article in the Dallas Morning News reporting a visit of Terry Murphy – Audie’s oldest son – and Larryann Willis to the Hunt County area in northeast Texas. They were conducting research and interviews for the recently established Audie Murphy Research Foundation. Although I did not have the opportunity to take off from work and meet them, the article provided an email address to the foundation and encouraged anyone interested in Audie Murphy to write. There were no catches to the invitation. The foundation just wanted people who were interested to contact them. Maybe you had a story to tell. Maybe you knew Audie. Maybe you wanted a free newsletter. These were all good reasons to write. After knocking aside my doubts I decided to do so and knew what I could write about for an icebreaker.

I wrote the foundation a note stating that, in my opinion as a high school teacher and as a former active-duty soldier, a website devoted to Audie Murphy was needed. I pointed out that at that time there was nothing factual or reliable on Audie Murphy on the Internet. I then volunteered to create a website for the foundation. I omitted the part that I had never built a website and did not know how to do it.

To my shock and surprise, the foundation quickly replied and asked that I do so.

To help, Ms. Willis, the foundation’s executive director and attorney, mailed photos, articles, and other information – some of which had never been seen by the public. This became the core for the original website.

In a mild panic, I sent my wife and two small children to Six Flags Over Texas and to visit family in the Dallas area. In turn, I stayed home and spent the next three days studying up on the protocol and nuances governing the use of the “Hypertext Markup Language” (a.k.a. HTML) – the computer language of the infantile CompuServe, Netscape and Internet Explorer browsers.

At the end of my family’s 3-day trip to Dallas, they came back home with an assortment of souvenirs, photos, and stories. When it was my turn to share, I was able to show off a 17-page website. It was bright red in color with gold titles, black text, and lots of pictures. As luck
would have it, the family and foundation both expressed approval. They seemed genuinely impressed despite the bright red hue the computer screen cast on our living room’s white walls. Secretly, I was worried that both parties were just being polite. Fortunately, the website would quickly improve. I started by changing its color scheme.

I was also concerned that more content was needed. I tried to think of ways to increase website interest and visitor traffic. This was when the idea of an Audie Murphy Commemorative Stamp resurfaced from my teenage past. I emailed Ms. Willis and proposed that an internet-based stamp petition be created.

In the foundation’s reply, Ms. Willis encouraged me to pursue the idea and suggested I might want to contact two retired individuals from northeast Texas who had already begun a local brick-and-mortar petition effort for an Audie Murphy stamp. Maybe I could throw in with them or get some advice. I followed Larryann’s suggestion.

As background, James and Diane Bates Thomason, were from Quinlan, Texas and were well-known to the Hunt County community. Their interest in an Audie Murphy Commemorative Stamp began in late 1995 after they read an article in the Greenville Herald Post titled “Murphy Should Be On A Stamp”.

The article discussed newly approved and soon-to-be released 1996 stamps just announced by the USPS. Ms. Ferguson noted that Audie Murphy – a local town hero – was not on the list and deserved his own stamp. The article concluded by printing the address of the Citizen’s Stamp Advisory Committee. Ms. Ferguson encouraged local readers to rally and write the USPS for the purpose of requesting a stamp on Audie’s behalf.

The article struck a nerve with the elderly James and Diane. Both were physically challenged. Despite their age and limitations, they decided to act. In no time, they were spearheading a grassroots effort to secure a stamp. With the energy and drive of a pair of marathon runners, James and Diane were frequently seen in front of a Walmart, a Piggly Wiggly or any other agreeable business armed with their homegrown petition, a few pens, and a folding card-table. No shopper who strolled into their line of sight managed to escape their attention. All were accosted and asked to support the Audie Murphy Stamp petition.

James happened to also be the commander of the local Veteran’s for War (VFW) Post #17 in Greenville, Texas. With every opportunity, Diane and James mustered the VFW’s enthusiastic help to increase the petition’s visibility. Soon multiple tables manned by vets donned in threadbare, pin-bedecked caps started simultaneously populating the landscape of local retail

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parking lots and busy store fronts on weekends. Optimism was high and local support was strong.

Despite everyone’s excellent “can-do” spirit 1995 was a slow year for the petition. Diane and James scraped together about seven thousand signatures. Being new to the activity and not knowing any better they were impressed by the volume of names collected. Hoping they were enough, the Thomasons boxed the petitions and sent them – certified mail of course – to the U.S. Postmaster General Marvin Runyon accompanied with a hopeful letter – probably not too unlike the letter I wrote in 1972.

To Diane’s and James’ dismay their petition – like mine – was flatly turned down. The USPS’s reply stated that no more stamps would ever be approved or issued for Medal of Honor recipients. The letter reasoned that because a 20-cent “Medal of Honor” commemorative stamp had already been issued in 1983 for all Medal of Honor recipients, Audie had previously been honored. For this reason, the case was closed – end of discussion – no stamp for Audie – nada – get over it – not happening.

Or so thought Marvin Runyon and his committee of advisors.

Diane Thomason and James were unimpressed by the rejection’s eloquence and its fancy letterhead stationary. The husband-wife team refused to quit. I can personally state for the record Diane was a real firecracker when someone made her mad – and Marvin Runyon made her mad. Really mad. Nothing was going to stop her from getting that stamp for Audie. To James great credit, he knew better than to discourage his wife. He later told me the secret to his marriage with Diane was not getting in her way and to do everything as a team. I believed him.

The fact is that Diane was a force to be reckoned with. In 1998, while getting petition materials made, Diane fell and broke her hip and from that point forward, required a walker to move around. Even still, there were no obstacles she could not overcome. Neither she or her husband would take “no” for an answer – and especially from Marvin Runyon.4

It was December of 1996 – or early 1997 that I wrote my first letter to Diane and

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4 “Audie Murphy fan stamps out doubt in quest” by Bob St. John; Dallas Morning News, April 24, 1999. (See the entire newspaper clipping is included at the end of this article.)

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James. After introducing myself and letting them know I was working with the foundation, I proposed to extend the petition beyond the local Hunt County community by promoting it globally.

The concept was simple. I suggested that Diane and James both continue their local efforts and remain the official voice for the petition. In turn, I would create a digitally based internet form that anyone could fill out and electronically submit when visiting the Audie L. Murphy Memorial Website from anywhere in the world. When a website petition was completed, it would automatically be forwarded to my email address. I would then print the form hard-copy and temporarily store it.

Later, when the printed stack of petitions appeared tall enough to my militarily calibrated eyeball, I would hand deliver them by loading them up in my 11-year-old Jeep Cherokee and transport them from Copperas Cove to Greenville – about a 150-mile trip. Diane and James could then consolidate them with theirs into a single package and forward them to the USPS as a unified effort.

In their response to me, Diane and James enthusiastically agreed to my idea and I was welcomed as a new member of the team. We exchanged email addresses and phone numbers. The petition drive had officially gone global.

As planned, I periodically met the Thomasons at the VFW post to deliver boxes of petitions. Everyone at the bar never failed to greet me warmly and drinks were always on the house. Not wanting to be unsocial, I would always politely accept an unadulterated Dr. Pepper with a plastic straw – it was a long drive back home and I needed to be ready to teach the next day.

The electronic petition started to work wonders. The volume of support began to increase exponentially – especially after a newspaper caught wind of the expanded effort. They wrote an article. The story was picked up by other newspapers. Online news media began doing the same. This happened a lot in the early days of the Internet.

Even still, I thought we could do better. I suspected petitions alone were not going to be enough. Afterall, we were dealing with federal government officials. They were not always the brightest bulbs in the land. We needed some political clout.

An idea came to mind and the website petition form was soon augmented with a few new pages. They contained the email and standard mailing addresses of the U.S. President, every U.S. congressman, senator, and all state governors. In the early days of the Internet, bona fide political online contact information was not hard to reference – I found it on other websites. Politicians were not yet receiving enough email to be concerned about spam or crackpot messages.

So, with the magic of “copy/paste” macros embedded in my computer’s operating system and with the help of a keyboard, text-editing software, and my blossoming skills in the HTML language I quickly fashioned a new set of website pages designed to give the petition some
extra “umpf!” in Washington D.C. and in the fifty state capitols.

In early 1997 elected officials started receiving a steady barrage of petition requests emailed from constituents all over the country. Occasionally, someone from out of country would email them too for good measure – after all, Audie was an international treasure. To everyone’s delight, politicians and governors began to respond. The nature of the petition was one practically all political figures could agree with regardless of which side of the aisle they sat on. Audie Murphy was truly a bi-partisan matter.

The greatest congressional supporter of the proposed stamp was Congressman Ralph Hall from the 4th Congressional District in Texas with local headquarters in Greenville, Texas – part of Audie’s home “stamping ground” 5. Congressman Hall immediately began applying pressure at the federal level on Marvin Runyon. In my view, Congressman Hall was unusually accessible. He was never hard to reach when we needed him. He personally answered mail we sent to his office and he personally spoke to Diane, James, and me on his visits to Greenville between 1996 and 1999 – especially during “Audie Murphy Day” events. Congressman Hall always brought everyone up to date with what he was doing for the stamp on these visits. It was a priority.

Meanwhile, Diane and James routinely boxed up the growing numbers of petitions and sent them to the USPS Citizen’s Stamp Advisory Committee with a polite but unequivocally written letter requesting approval of the stamp. All of this happened under the watchful eye of Congressman Hall who periodically weighed in with the USPS on the petition’s behalf.

By the end of 1998 – 3 long years after starting the petition - the replies from the USPS became more carefully worded. Diane, James, and I began to think that our efforts were gaining traction.

It was in 1996 that the USPS unwittingly committed its greatest blunder as it publicly announced that an agreement had been struck between the USPS,

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5 An example of a clever and deliberately placed double entendre appropriate to the context of this article.
Warner Brothers, and major retailers to issue commemorative Bugs Bunny stamps, key chains, stuffed animals, and other USPS sponsored Looney-Tune cartoon-based stamp memorabilia beginning in 1997. Daffy Duck, Elmer Fudd, and other characters were being planned for future releases too.

To the USPS’s great surprise and dismay, an immediate backlash came from Audie’s fans and interested political circles. Ironically, Marvin Runyon was born in Fort Worth, Texas6 - just down the road from Greenville. Many felt he should have known better. Shame on him!

Newspaper articles were quick to pick up the story and the angle was always the same: Audie Murphy’s stamp was disapproved but Bugs Bunny’s stamp was not. What in the world was happening to America? Congressman Hall wasted no time jumping into the fray. He publicly threatened in Washington to launch a congressional investigation into the cozy relationship between USPS officials, 

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6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marvin_Travis_Runyon

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Warner Brothers, and retailers. Other politicians began to sound out too.

The volume of support world-wide against Bugs and for the Audie stamp rapidly accelerated. More and more people signed the petition. Other countries sensed a marketing opportunity and issued their own Audie stamps. Figuratively, it seemed that the USPS had ripped the back of its britches wide open and the entire world was pointing at their embarrassment – an expression appropriate to northeast Texas and one that Diane and James Thomason would approve of today.

Was Marvin Runyon backed into a corner? Is it possible the USPS had miscalculated? Was the ever-financially-strapped USPS’s hopes of a profit windfall threatening to become a major liability? Maybe the USPS should look for a way to control the damage.

Whispers of a possible stamp honoring Audie began to be heard by Diane, James, and myself. The letters of reply sent by the Citizen’s Stamp Advisory Committee with the delivery of each box of petitions seemed to strike a more hopeful tone. We analyzed every word and read between each line. While the USPS was not explicitly committing to a stamp their replies were more thoughtfully crafted. They no longer rejected our proposal. They began inserting words to their messages that Audie Murphy was now being “considered for a future stamp”.7

Diane, James, and I cautiously agreed that there appeared to be a thawing in the USPS’s tone. Had their position changed? Maybe. Were we seeing the fabled “light at the end of the tunnel?” We hoped so. Encouraged, all efforts were redoubled. We push forward while the volume of support continued to grow on all levels.

Finally, in mid-1999 the USPS announced a new series of commemorative stamps for distinguished military service members. Accordingly, three distinct block sets with four different stamps in each were to be issued every several years. The first block was to be printed and sold in the year 2000. It would commemorate four distinguished U.S. Army soldiers. Included was Audie L. Murphy.

Several years later, a second set would be issued in the series to honor famous Marines. Later still, another set commemorating noteworthy members of the Navy was to be released.

7 “Audie Murphy fan stamps out doubt in quest” by Bob St. John; Dallas Morning News, April 24, 1999. (Article is found in its entirety on the last page of this story).
On October 24, 1999, an unveiling took place in Dallas, Texas at the city's main post office. The USPS hosted the ceremony and flew representatives from Washington D.C. to the Lone Star State for the unveiling. Audie’s two sisters, Beatrice “Billie” and Nadine were present along with the stamp petition organizers, James and Diane Thomason, and me. Distinguished guests, friends of the Audie Murphy family, and the local community were also invited. Remarks were given by Congressman Ralph Hall and Texas Senator Phil Gramm. As it turned out, I was the only person that had a camera – a Kodak digital pocket camera – so by default I became the official photographer.

Later, everyone agreed that the petition, which took much longer than we ever envisioned, was well-worth the effort. Collectively, 7,000 signatures were gathered that first year. During the second year, the total increased to 20,000. By the end of third year – 40,000. At the time of the Dallas unveiling in the fall of 1999 over 105,000 signatures total had been collected. Fans and admirers of Audie from 25 countries participated. The Internet petition remained active until December 31, 1999 – a fitting conclusion to the millennium.

The stamp was finally released for sale at post offices across America on May 3, 2000.

So, what did it all mean?

On the surface, not too much when considering the problems of today. Afterall, who needs a stamp? Why not just send an email, tweet, or do a Zoom conference or a Facetime on social media? What’s the big deal? Is a stamp really needed to honor Audie Murphy? Is his legacy damaged without a stamp? Probably not.

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On the other hand, determination is not a characteristic reserved exclusively for heroes like Audie. Spunk, grit, and perseverance can be part of everybody’s skill set. Even little old white-haired grandmothers shuffling along with a broken hip assisted by a devoted husband can possess these qualities. The herculean effort needed to acquire Audie’s stamp brought this feature out in a lot of simple people. I hope you think so. I know I do.

On a broader scale, the petition had a positive impact far beyond what the petition organizers originally intended. In academic circles this is called “synergy”. To be clear, the sum of our combined efforts far exceeded the expected outcome of the organizers had we acted alone.

Think of it. The public outcry became so widespread – particularly over the Bugs Bunny versus Audie Murphy public relations debacle – that the USPS could not afford any more negative press or political pressure. It wanted no more to do with angry old ladies hobbling about on walking devices, veterans wearing garrison caps decorated with tarnished military pins, schoolteachers holding open cans of Dr. Pepper impaled with a bent soda pop straw, or concerned voters contacting elected politicians. These folks were getting in the way of the USPS’s plans to make badly needed money at a time when profit margins were razor thin. Worse, it was being written about in the newspapers while other countries were beginning to capitalize on an opportunity the USPS very nearly missed.

The truth of the matter is that simple every day citizens figured out a way to bend Washington bureaucrats to their will. There was no doubt that the outcome was much bigger than we ever intended. Yes – there was synergy.
Let us just say it: to everyone’s great surprise not only was Audie commemorated, eleven other courageous military heroes were also so honored. Audie-petitioners had a direct hand in this unexpected bonanza. It was truly a bountiful harvest. You are welcome to disagree.

If you are unconvinced think of it from a different perspective. While Audie would probably not have liked the fuss about having his face being planted on a postage stamp, he would certainly approve that eleven other military heroes were. He would also appreciate how petitioners locked arms to achieve this outcome.

Are you still not satisfied? Then ask yourself this question. If Audie needed a stamp would he reach for Bugs or would he plunk down 33 cents for a first-class Sergeant York? I think he would go for Sergeant York. I will go out even further on the proverbial limb and hypothesize that Audie would have passed out a petition or two to help us get the Sergeant York, Chesty Puller, Doris Miller, and any of the other stamps too.

And what about Bugs Bunny? Let us not forget him. There are lessons aplenty here too.

As it turns out, Bugs got his stamp – and then some. In 1997, Bugs received his first – one of many which would later follow. In his most recent batch, ten different Bugs images on a single sheet of twenty stamps were released in 2020. This may make him the most commemorated figure in USPS philatelic history. And to be fair, Bugs is a very popular and widely collected stamp figure.

In the minds of the USPS is Bugs Bunny historically more significant than Audie and anyone else ever commemorated on a stamp? Let us hope not. Maybe Bugs is just more recognizable because we grew up watching cartoons every Saturday morning long before we were old enough to appreciate the significance and complexities of Audie Murphy. Bugs Bunny can have a place in our hearts too.

Admit it: Bugs helped teach us all – including the bureaucrats at the USPS – a valuable lesson in civic duty. Sometimes the common citizen needs to be reminded

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that it is their responsibility to tell the government who works for who.

It seems we still need a lot of that even today.

Look a little closer. If you have not already examined Bug’s set of 2020 stamps you should now. The last stamp in the series of ten depicts Bugs Bunny in a World War II Army uniform with the rank of a staff sergeant – Audie’s highest enlisted rank.

Could this be a symbolic nod of respect and an olive branch extended toward Audie and all other service members past and present? Is the USPS and Warner Brothers tipping their hat in our direction acknowledging a nearly 5-yearlong battle once waged with Audie fans about the importance of a stamp selected by actual citizens? Maybe Staff Sergeant Bugs Bunny is meant to suggest an apology or truce for a poorly handled set of events leading up to the final approval of the Distinguished Military Service Member series of commemorative stamps. I will leave it to you to decide.

- Richard Rodgers
Audie Murphy Research Foundation
February 14, 2021
Richard Rodgers
AMRF Webmaster

The Dallas Morning News
Saturday, April 24, 1999

Audie Murphy fan stamps out doubt in quest

GREENVILLE — With her head held high, Diane Bates Thomason, limping slightly, walked through the door of American Legion Post No. 17 as if she were a person with a purpose. Indeed she was.

The spunky, white-haired woman has been undaunted by long hours of work, bureaucracy and a broken hip in her relentless quest to get a commemorative stamp honoring Audie Murphy.

She came fully armed to our meeting at the local post of the American Legion, an organization which strongly supports her campaign. She brought Audie Murphy T-shirts and stamps, which she had made and hopes people supporting her effort will place beside official stamps on their mail. She also had a huge portfolio of information about the Hunt County native, who became our most honored World War II hero. He later was in numerous movies, starring in a film based on his biography, To Hell and Back.

“I used to jitterbug, polka and dance up a storm,” Diane said as we sat at a table near the legion’s empty dance floor. “But I’ve slowed down after breaking my hip. For now.”

Down but not out

She fell while entering a store to have copies made of Audie Murphy material.

Diane helps with costs of the campaign, which she hopes will pay for, by selling Audie Murphy T-shirts and stamps. She conducts business out of her home in the nearby community of Cash. However, her address and phone number are listed in Quinlan, which has the nearest post office (903-883-2211, 1378 Deer Lane, Quinlan, TX, 75474).

I would imagine there are people in Washington wondering who this persistent woman is. “Just describe me as being old enough to have learned most things about life and young enough to still enjoy it,” said Diane, who grew up in South Dakota as the eldest of eight siblings. “I tell my brothers and sisters that, as the first born, I’m the love child and that they’re all accidents.”

Diane was a military wife who lived in Hawaii and later San Antonio for some 40 years. Her first husband, Ted Bates, was an Air Forceman who was killed in 1969, leaving her with three teenage sons to raise. One son died four years ago.

But she’s a determined, resilient person. She has authored a book about spices and herbs, Spicy Talk, and has had several successful business ventures. In the mid-1960s, Diane and her son, spotted by a film crew while they were at poolside in a Corpus Christi hotel, did national commercials for Post Bran Flakes.

She met James, from this area, and they married in 1991. At first some local residents mistook Diane for then-Gov. Ann Richards. They know who she is now. The idea for her campaign began on a November day in 1995 when she read an editorial in the Greenville Herald Banner, which questioned why there wasn’t an Audie Murphy commemorative stamp. Diane became very upset, and the more she learned about him the more she became determined to try to correct the obvious oversight.

“One of these days I’ll hit the right nerve of the right person and it’ll be done,” she added.

Then with her head held high, limping slightly, she walked away as if she expected to find that right person around the next corner.

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