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Taking Shape
Oklahoma artist sculpts larger-than-life lawman for Dodge City's Trail of Fame

GATE, Okla. -- Standing beside a mammoth headless statue of Wyatt Earp approximately 9 feet tall, sculptor Mary Spurgeon called her creation for Dodge City's downtown area "bigger than life."

"I didn't think it would look that big myself," Mary said with a laugh, her own diminutive form dwarfed by the giant clay figure looming nearby. "This is the largest statue I have ever done."

Mary was chosen by the Dodge City Trail of Fame committee to design and create a 14-inch bronze statue of Wyatt Earp that has been reproduced to sell. Proceeds will help finance the larger statue, which also will be cast in bronze.

The 9-foot rendition of the infamous lawman of the Old West will be placed somewhere in downtown Dodge City. The most popular site being proposed is the evergreened corner of Wyatt Earp and Central, down the block from the Trails West store owned by Mary's daughter, Linda Spurgeon.



Charlene Scott/Daily Globe
 Mary Spurgeon stands next to the body of the Wyatt Earp statue.

"The enlargement, which has foam inside, is called 'the point up man,'" Mary explained. "The smaller statue of Wyatt Earp was cut into blocks and computerized to make the enlargement. It should be exactly like the smaller statue, but all your mistakes are magnified when you have an enlargement."

The enlargement was produced by a firm in Norman, Okla., and was transported over the rough roads of the Panhandle. It arrived with a broken leg and left foot, and the hands fell off. The head was so heavy, it had to be detached from the torso.

"Our new minister came to



Charlene Scott/Daily Globe
 Mary Spurgeon shows a picture of Wyatt Earp she used to sculpt the head for the Wyatt Earp statue.

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see the statue, and he said it wasn't the headless horseman, but the horseless head," Mary said, laughing again. "The statue's face also was crooked, and I had to shave some of it off.

"I've tried to get him to look real mean, but he looks more anxious," Mary added as she took a few swipes to trim the huge clay head that is larger than the 14-inch statue. "The head is the most difficult part, to get it to resemble Wyatt Earp.

"The oil-based clay -- classic clay, they call it -- is soft, but it gets harder when it's cold. When I had the head in the kitchen, I would work on it even when I was eating. I would see something wrong and stop eating to fix it."

The head and the headless torso ended up in a new, large straw bale garage with 18-inch-thick walls constructed next to Mary's Western-style house. Mary and her late husband, Bill, built the house from the wooden planks of an old bridge he purchased.

"My son Shannon came from Wichita and put up the lights, and my son James from Woodward installed the heating system in the garage," she said. "My son, Del Roy, helps me every day, and he's the one who will lift the head onto the statue."

Mary has toiled six to eight hours a day for several weeks on the statue, and "out here in the garage, I can work way into the night," she added.

"There was quite a bit of texture work to do on the coat, the trousers and the feet. On the small statue, the left foot is lifted off the ground, but the left foot on this large statue was flat. I could fix that, but it just took time."

The next step in the process of creating the statue will be a trip to a mold-maker in Loveland, Colo., who then will send the statue to the Art Castings of Colorado foundry there.

"We will take the statue in a trailer and hope we can get it to Loveland without it breaking up," Mary said. "We are going to cut it in two at the waist. The mold-maker doesn't care where we cut it. They often cut the coat in back off, but they weld it back on and you can't tell where they cut it."

The mold-maker will work on the statue for at least four months before it is sent to the foundry to be cast into bronze. Mary will visit the foundry to make any necessary last-minute changes.

"The statue will have a Western brown patina," she explained. "Over the years, the patina usually darkens, but we will keep it a warm brown to start out with, or what they call a 'French patina' back East -- a darker golden brown."

Her grandfather migrated to Dodge City "not long after Wyatt Earp left town," and now Mary, a great-grandmother, has sculpted a lasting memorial to the lawman. Her silver hair surrounding her head like a halo, she sat in her cozy kitchen and summed up her thoughts about her endeavor.

"It was harder work to sculpt the smaller statue because there's not much margin for error with a small statue," she decided.

"Next we have to think about a design for the base of the statue, which will be similar to that of El Capitan (the Longhorn steer statue on Wyatt Earp Boulevard.)

"I like what they've done by moving El Capitan; he looks like he's out to pasture in his natural habitat of grass," said the woman in her 80s who still tends to her 200 head of cross-bred Hereford and Angus cattle.

"I've started this work late in my life," she mused. "I would have had more time when I was young. I've already begun work on my next project, a cutting mare with a man beside him. And I'm working on a sculpture of Dull Knife, who was a Northern Cheyenne Indian first known as Morning Star.

"He was in a battle with the Sioux and tried to stab a warrior, but he couldn't pierce his shield," she said. "So the Sioux Indian named him 'Dull Knife.' The Indians had a sense of humor, don't you think?"

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