

Museum to gift state with monument

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PHOTO BY JARED DORT/YUMA SUN

The Museum of History in Granite will dedicate its 100-foot monument of the "History of Arizona" Feb. 14.

The Museum of History in Granite in Felicity, Calif., will be presenting a 100-foot, double-sided granite monument depicting the state's history at a dedication ceremony on Sunday, Feb. 14, at 4 p.m.

The gift comes from the trustees board of the Hall of Fame of Parachuting, which runs the museum at the World Commemorative Center featuring several granite monuments, the most notable a multiple-panel monument listing highlights of humanity's history.

Felicity, located west of Yuma along Interstate 8, is the site of a popular tourist attraction known as the Center of the World.

After the deed is turned over to Arizona officials at the ceremony, visitors touching the monument "will be standing in California but touching Arizona," noted Jacques-Andre Istel, 80, chairman of the trustees board and creator of the Center of the World.

The gift will include 100 years of maintenance "after which nobody will remember anything," Istel joked.

The planned program, which had not been finalized by press time, will start with a salute by the Pioneers of Parachuting, the national anthem by the U.S. Marine Corps, color march by the USMC Color Guard and introductions by Istel, in his role as mayor of Felicity.

Several special events will mark the program, including a naturalization ceremony and an award presentation to Imperial County, Calif., Sheriff Oren Fox.

Greetings will be given by Yuma Mayor Alan L. Krieger and Deputy Mayor Paul B. Johnson and the original inhabitants of the property via Quechan Indian Tribe President Mike Jackson and Brian Golding Sr., director of the tribe's Economic Development Administration.

Guests will also receive New Year's Day greetings from China. Istel notes Felicity is the first American town to be named after a Chinese woman, his wife Felicia. A greeting is also expected from the United Nations through Ambassador Jean-Marie Daillet.

And in a testament to the worldwide interest in the museum, a delegation from the Bahamas, including poet and historian Ashley Saunders, will also be attending the ceremony.

The program will end with a brief reading from the granite History of Arizona and the Yuma Choir's rendition of "America the Beautiful." Birthday cake will then be served.

The monument commemorates a lot of state "firsts" with highlights ranging from the Gadsden Purchase and the road to statehood to the Indian wars and frontier days, including a nod to the "art of cattle rustling." The monument also features notable literature, arts, music, railroad, water issues, Arizona trails, Route 66 and even famous "scoundrels."

The museum has attracted a lot of artists, some coming from as far as Ireland and France to volunteer at the site. Seamus Nee of Ireland did a lot of the stonework inside the hilltop church and is now doing stonework around the monument.

From Brittany, France, artist Hervé Saliou, 77, a winner of France's gold medal in arts, is volunteering 2-1/2 months to the museum. He did a lot of the etchings in the Arizona monument.

"It's an exceptional site. There are no two like it in the world," the French-speaking Saliou told the Yuma Sun, with interpretation by Istel. "My art will endure. I wanted to participated in the History of Humanity. Figuratively, the world is a monument and I want to bring a stone as part of the edifice."

"He's a nice guy," Istel said. "Saliou has done a lot for Arizona."

Istel, a native Frenchman, said he met Saliou through a French general who attended the dedication of the Monument of Aviation. After contacting Saliou by phone, the two became friends.

Artist Gene Britton, 31, has done a lot of the engraving on the granite monuments, first working on the site about 14 years ago.

Istel said the museum will eventually depict the individual histories of every state. He expects hundreds to be built, all for a "noble" purpose.

The town is "dedicated to remembrance," he said, with memories engraved in granite. The public is welcome to add their own "memories," including births, baptisms, graduations, weddings, anniversaries, retirement and deaths.

After purchasing the 2,800-acres property in 1959, Istel said, he and his wife wanted to do something "spectacular" and decided to build a pyramid. Eventually came other monuments, such as Michelangelo's arm of God on a sundial pointing to the church.

The museum began with the USMC Korean War Memorial dedicated in 1998. However, Istel said he "usually runs away from museums" and never planned to build one — this one came about unexpectedly.

"I wanted to remember friends and family. We decided to build a monument for my friends who died in the Korean War. Then we decided to do others for aviation (called Quest for the Sky), then the Foreign Legion."

The most ambitious monument is probably the History of Humanity, which aspires to record the entire history of mankind, from the origins of language, timekeeping, early medicine, ancient civilizations, philosophies, Biblical stories and even includes jokes hidden among the panels.

In the center, a "Rosetta Stone for the future" is being built. Istel hopes it will help future archaeologists understand present-day languages.

"Who will be able to speak English or Spanish in three, four thousand years?" Istel asked rhetorically.

To reach Felicity from Yuma, take Interstate 8 heading toward San Diego. Felicity is located eight miles west of the California state line. Take Exit 164 (Sidewinder Road), then almost immediately turn left onto Center of the World Drive (frontage road). Pass the California Highway Patrol station on the left and arrive at the entrance to Felicity.

For more information, go to www.historyingranite.org.

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