

OUR iOWA

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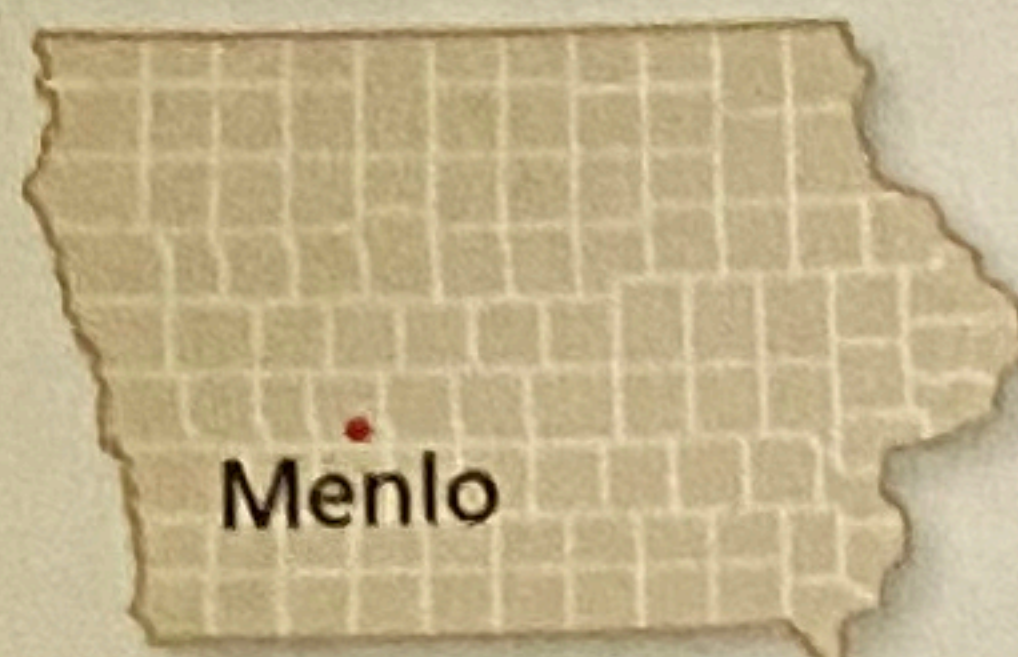


COUNTRY CHARACTERS

Rocks to Say 'We Thank You'

With patriotic paint and lots of statewide inspiration, this artist has created a nationally recognized tour of veterans memorials across Iowa.

YEARS AGO, a young man who was tired of seeing graffiti in his community took it upon himself to honor military veterans by painting a large rock along Highway 25 near Menlo.



Today, thousands of people from across our state and nation visit the attraction called the Freedom Rock, painted by local mural artist Ray "Bubba" Sorensen.

Although Bubba creates a new design on the Freedom Rock each spring, the American flag draped over the top of the rock and a Huey helicopter—made with paint mixed with the ashes of Vietnam veterans—have become staples of this rock's painted image.

"The idea for painting that first rock came to me in 1999 after I watched the World War II movie *Saving Private Ryan*," Bubba explains. "I wanted to do something to honor those who served. It was then, and still is today, my thank-you to veterans for their service."

An Unlikely Start

That one painted rock grew into the Freedom Rock Tour project. This artist's vision was to paint a tribute to veterans on large rocks in each of Iowa's 99 counties.

"It really took off," Bubba says. "I started painting these permanent rocks in 2013, and people couldn't wait to get a Freedom Rock in their county."

"It's kind of funny how I got into this project because I never really liked to



MURALS MADE WITH MEMORIES. Each year, Bubba repaints the original Freedom Rock in Adair County with a new scene depicting our military heroes. This was his 2020 rendition.

paint—I liked to draw. What I was really interested in was the computer aspect of art. That's what I started doing after college, using graphic art to help agricultural businesses get on the Web and design their ads.

"I grew up the son of a cattleman, so I had ties to agriculture. I enjoyed helping introduce farmers and ag businesses to the Internet and showing them how they could promote agriculture online.

"But once I got the patriotism bug, my career obviously took a turn. Sometimes I have to remind people that I acquired this passion in 1999, before the attacks of September 11, 2001. Before that date, patriotism wasn't as evident in this country as it is today.

"The first time I painted the Menlo rock was for Memorial Day. I wanted to remind people that this treasured obser-

vance was more than just another 3-day weekend for leisure."

Couldn't Budge the Boulder

The original Freedom Rock has been sitting outside the quarry in Adair County since the 1960s. According to local lore, the rock actually sits illegally too close to the highway.

"The story goes that back when the quarry folks moved it there, the DOT came out and said it was too close to the road," Bubba relates. "The quarry people told the DOT they could move it. That became a quick 'never mind' from the DOT, because nobody had the equipment at the time to move a 60-ton-plus rock.

"So the rock simply got grandfathered into the landscape, and it became a sort of graffiti billboard for people driving by. People enjoyed seeing the graffiti messages change, which is why I still change



MADISON COUNTY is home to this Freedom Rock, located outside John Wayne's birthplace.

Side Note: "Tomorrow hopes we have learned something from yesterday." —John Wayne