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Huge, beautiful mural dedicated at Bronson Ace Hardware



People begin to mill about and start going toward the refreshment table after the ceremony. Another activity after the event was to browse through the hardware store and discover the many items available to buy there.

Story, Photos and Video By Jeff M. Hardison © Dec. 23, 2016 at 10:37 p.m.

BRONSON -- It was an idea for 15 years, and it was a set of vignettes, and it was an artistic venture that included one key artist, a trusted assistant professional artist and a set of home-schooled artists.



Ed and Peggy Rowe set up a couple of his paintings to display before the ceremony starts.

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"The Heart of Levy County" mural received the signature of artist Ed Rowe on Friday evening (Dec. 23) as a small crowd of people watched the moment. The program with Rowe, and Bronson Ace Hardware owner Wendell Stainsby and Bronson Ace Hardware Manager John Meeks was full of positive warmth -- as one might expect on the eve before Christmas Eve.

Rowe's 60-foot masterpiece took more than two months to create on the huge gray southern wall of the building on the northwest corner of Thrasher Drive (State Road 24) and Hathaway Avenue (U.S. Alt. 27) in Bronson.

That wall became a perfect canvass for the local masterpiece.

Meeks opened the program by announcing that Rowe would be signing the mural, there would be some speaking, and then everyone was welcome to join in the enjoyment of refreshments.

Rowe thanked Stainsby for giving him the opportunity to create and complete the mural project.

This project, Rowe said, was "on the shelf for 15 years." It was originally designed for the underpass for the Interstate-75 exit at Williston Road.

After the terrorists' attacks on the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, the sponsorships for the piece disappeared, he said, and it sat idle for a long time.

"This is Levy County, from one end to the other," Rowe said, "from peanuts to watermelons and everything in between."



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A couple of other works by Ed Rowe are seen here.

He mentioned that Cindy Pagel of Gainesville provided several weeks' work. Pagel told *HardisonInk.com* earlier in the afternoon that one of the things she did was to carefully move the rolling ladder. This made it so he did not have to go up and down the steps as much to reposition himself as he worked on the mural.

Pagel, 50, graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Florida in 2003. She is the sole proprietor of an art-framing company. She is also a professional artist.

In addition to creating fine art on normal canvass, Rowe teaches art to home-schooled children, his wife Peggy Rowe told *HardisonInk.com* before the ceremony.

The artist mentioned to the crowd that four homeschoolers painted some of the flowers, water lilies and butterflies at the lower points on the mural. He did not ask them to climb the ladder.

Rowe said the title of "The Heart of Levy County" is true at Bronson Ace Hardware, because in the two months he has been painting it, he has seen – in that parking lot -- everyone he has known or met in this county during the past 33 years here.

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County Commissioner Lilly Rooks is welcomed by County Commission Chairman John Meeks.



Wendell Stainsby (left) shakes hands with artist Ed Rowe moments before the signing. Rowe is holding the paintbrush he signed the mural with in his left hand here.

When Stainsby spoke, he told the crowd he was glad that he had the wall for Rowe to put the mural on.

“I just wanted to give back a little bit to the community that has given me so much,” Bronson Ace Hardware owner Stainsby said. “I am just trying to beautify a little portion of Levy County.”

Earlier in the afternoon, Stainsby told *HardisonInk.com* that he had seen similar

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murals beautifying other areas of Florida. After Stainsby had painted the exterior of the store, Stainsby was speaking with Rowe in the summer.

They agreed to the mural project, but it was too hot in the summer to start then.



John Meeks (left) speaks about Wendell Stainsby moments after the mural was signed. Meeks let everyone know that the owner of the Bronson Ace Hardware Store is an excellent gentleman who cares about the people in the area.

Meeks let the people know about himself, Bronson Ace Hardware and Stainsby.

Meeks started working at the hardware store in June of 1995, he said.

After that time, he finished earning a degree from the University of Florida and he was just re-elected to his second term as a member of the Levy County Board of County Commissioners, where he is the chairman.

Meeks said his success in business, at college and in politics is thanks in large part to Stainsby seeing something in him and helping him in those ventures.

This store opened under Stainsby's ownership in January of 1995, Meeks said, although the man had started that project in December of 1994.

Meeks first went to the store to buy bolts to repair his pickup truck, which he had damaged while hunting.

There were not enough shelves for bolts back then, Meeks said, but he and Stainsby went to the back of the store and found bolts that were in bags.

Meeks said he was not certain Stainsby would make it in Levy County without shelves for bolts.

Meeks' father came home one day in March of 1995 and mentioned that he did not think the new hardware store owner would make it in Levy County, because it was turkey season and when Meeks' father went to the hardware store, Stainsby did not know what "turkey shot" was.

"Turkey shot" is the ammunition for shotguns with the shells having shot sizes for

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turkeys -- fours, fives, sixes and even 7-1/2s.

His father mentioned to Meeks that he saw a “Help Wanted” sign, and he suggested that the young man apply.

In June of 1995, the watermelon-picking project where Meeks had been making money from that job had been rained out. Coincidentally, Stainsby called to ask if he wanted to work at Bronson Ace Hardware.

Meeks said he has worked there ever since. He loves his job, and he loves being able to help the people of Bronson.

Meeks said he thinks it is easy for him in that regard, but he asked the audience to think about a person who comes to the area from Gainesville.

Stainsby has put in the time and effort to make the store grow to keep up with the needs of the people, Meeks said.

Meeks reflected back 20 years ago to the days when he and Stainsby would stand behind a semi tractor-trailer loaded with Ready Mix concrete bags. They would unload bag after bag by hand.

Today, Meeks said, the store has a forklift and yet he hears some complaining about having to unload the concrete delivery truck pallets – using a forklift. He lets those workers know they should have tried the job 20 years ago – in the pre-forklift days.

When Stainsby opened the store in Bronson, some people might have thought he needed Bronson.

But really, Meeks said, Bronson needed Stainsby -- “a man with his vision and his professionalism,” Meeks said, “and his business sense – to run a business the way a business is needed to be run.”

Stainsby has embraced the Bronson community, Meeks said, to the same level as people who are from Bronson.

Stainsby is a strong leader who has built a business that everyone in Bronson and Levy County can be proud of, Meeks said.

“He deals fair,” Meeks said, “and he takes care of the local people. And everybody knows his heart is here. Even though he lives in Gainesville, his heart is in Bronson.

“That’s reflected by this mural and this sign that’s above us now “The Heart of Levy County,”” Meeks said. “Well, I am going to venture to say that the heart of Bronson is with this man. And I mean that from the bottom of my heart.”

Meeks went on to say he is thankful for the help Stainsby has given him in his life, and that the store also helps support eight families by providing employment.

“As thankful as everyone is for a good hardware store,” Meeks said, “I thank God every day for some broken bolts, turkey shot, and a chance a guy gave me.”

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Ceremony Preparation



Bronson Ace Hardware Store Manager John Meeks makes a clean sweep of the parking lot on the south side of the store. Meeks was preparing late Friday afternoon (Dec. 23) for the ceremonial signing of an amazing mural by artist Ed Rowe. To see the whole story, photos and a video, please visit the [LEISURE PAGE](#).

Photo by Jeff M. Hardison © Dec. 23, 2016 at 10:37 p.m.